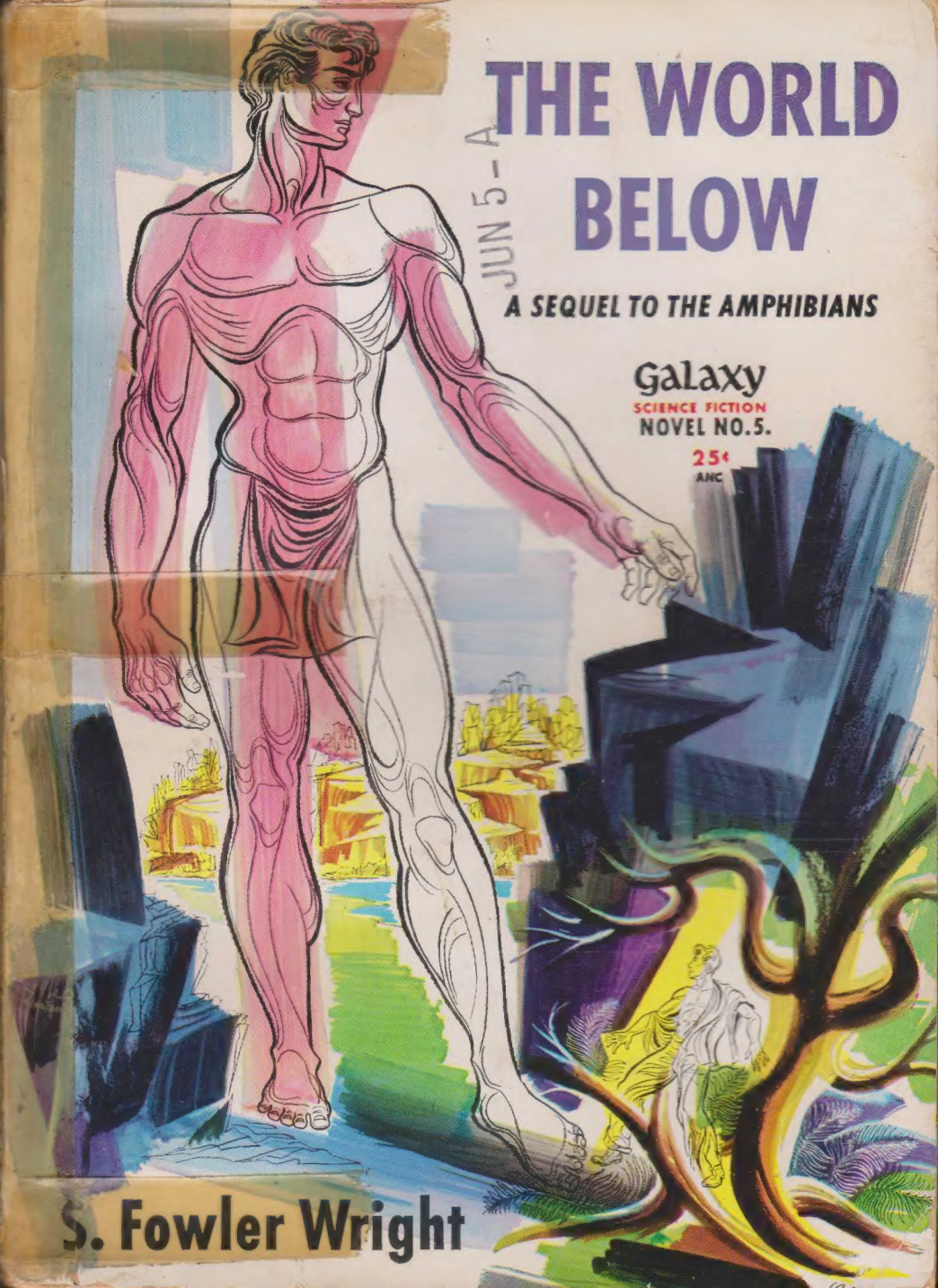

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By

S. FOWLER WRIGHT



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Published by Arrangement with
Shasta Publishers

Printed in the United States of America

Foreword

The World Below is justly famous as the outstanding science-fiction book written between H. G. Wells's earlier imaginative romances and Olaf Stapledon's future histories. It can be read as a science-fiction thriller, for it is a marvelously rich compound of unbounded background imagination and fantastic adventure. In sheer alien concept it is almost unparalleled in fantastic fiction. And yet Mr. Wright's restraint, his poise, his logic so successfully counterbalance his powerful imagination that his marvels, although all the more alien, remain completely plausible. No one will soon forget the cabbage-whips, the parasitic grass, or the Amphibian itself.

Yet *The World Below* like Mr. Wright's other fantastic books, is more than a thriller. It is a serious examination of that problem of fatigue and degeneration in man which has resulted from his one-sided growth and lack of harmony with the universe. A 20th century man is sent into the world of the future—a man combining possibilities of action, spirit, and intellect, although tainted by the bad ethical background of his time—and there he meets two widely divergent branches of the human race: the Dwellers and the Amphibians. The Dwellers are giants in body and intellect, with a brilliant and ruthless super-science, but are fatigued and gradually dying out. The Amphibians, on the other hand, although equal to the Dwellers mentally, have stressed quietism, and despite their intense spirituality and harmony with nature, lack strength for action. They no longer reproduce, and their numbers are limited and increased by laws which are beyond the hero's understanding. Thus, man, as the Dwellers know, has reached another of his cyclic degeneration points. It now remains for the primitive from the 20th century, after he has been cleansed by the superior ethics of both Dwellers and Amphibians, to offer a syn-

thesis of human capabilities beyond the power of the hyperspecialized future men, even though he still remains inferior to both within their own specializations. It is within his power to return from the 20th century with a woman, and start a new race of man.

Throughout *The World Below* the reader who is historically minded will catch reminiscences of *The Time Machine*, which Mr. Wright mentions, and possibly a glimpse of David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*. But the strongest influence on *The World Below* is from the Italian poet Dante. The hero's descent, the Amphibians psychopomp, the various hells, the legalistic vulture-men, the satires on the brilliant but wicked lizards, and the Killers, all recall the Inferno. It is thus no surprise that Mr. Wright is a Dante scholar, and is soon to publish a translation of *The Divine Comedy*.

Chapter One

COUNCIL

THE night had fallen to blackness while we still lay in the rock-cleft.

The ashes of the central buildings glowed with a pale blue light and an occasional flame would rise up and lick across them like a ghostly tongue.

The long curve of the living-wall had fallen in from end to end, but the ashes were burning still, with a paler flame, so that it showed like a white bow in the darkness.

There were no stars; the night had clouded while we slept—for I lay long in a sleep of utter weariness and exhaustion, both of mind

and body; and so, I think, in her own way, did my companion.

But I waked at length, with a dim sense of peril ended, and the short pause of security which is so precious to those who walk in dangerous ways, but conscious also of thirst and hunger, and of the shadow of great events, of which the significance was beyond my knowing.

I lay for some time in silence, pondering the strange things I had seen; reviewing—not without some mental discords—my judgment of the Bat-wings, and the fate to which it had cast them, and wondering vainly what new marvels or terrors might be before us, when we should penetrate the subterranean world of which we were about equally ignorant.

As I lay I became aware that the night was chilly, though, being cloudy, it was less so than we had experienced previously. But I was suffering from a lowered vitality, and though my wounds were trivial I was conscious of the throbbing of my scalded foot, and that my right shoulder was both stiff and painful.

I then fell into a mood of depression, in which I saw very vividly the folly of the adventure which we had undertaken. How could we hope to penetrate undetected into the domain of the Dwellers? There was no sanity in the supposition. If I wished to live till the year of my exile were over, should I not endeavor to find some crevice in the surface-world, of which I already knew something, where I might hope that my insignificance would save me?

If those whom I had come to seek survived at all, was I not more likely to discover them under such conditions, than among those whom I had seen squeezing the juice from the living bodies of the Killers, as casually as a cook stones raisins?

While I thought thus, my companion's mind gave no sign, nor had I heard any movement from her. With a sudden start of terror I imagined that she were no longer beside me. It was in that panic fear that I realized how greatly I had come to depend upon her; alike upon her body for its vigor, and upon her mind for its counsel. And beyond this I knew that there was a spiritual quality in our intimacy, through which I was able to face the shadows of the unknown world of the distant future with something of her own serenity.

IT WAS a simple action to reach out to feel where she lay beside me, and yet my hand delayed it.

Partly I may have been deterred by the atmosphere of aloof virginity which always made me diffident of any physical contact, partly it was that I dreaded to test my fear, as a man with a coward's mind may leave a letter unopened, know-

ing that it may hold the news of his ruin.

At last, I felt across the narrow space which had divided us as we lay and watched the concluding drama of our adventure, and with a sense of measureless relief my hand touched lightly for a moment on the smoothness of the soft warm fur.

HER mind opened instantly, realized the mood I showed her, and crossed it with the gaiety with which she ever faced the thought of peril. Then—with the subtle distinction which she always drew between myself and the body in which I lived—she asked me, "Is it more trouble than usual? Has it no gratitude for the rest you have given it?"

I answered, "It is rested by sleep, but has gone without food long beyond its accustomed time. It can do this while it shares your vitality, but afterward the need re-asserts itself with increased urgency. It is cold also, and, as you know, it has suffered recent damage, which it needs rest to repair."

She replied, "I can give you strength, if you need it, and if you think it wise; but consider.

"We have resolved on an adventure of which we do not know the length or the end. Of myself, I should continue in the ordinary course without food for about four months, after which I should require a time of rest and nourishment, before I should be fit for another year. If necessary, I could continue living, and in some measure of activity, for a much longer period. But I have been giving you of my own energy so freely that, if we continue in this way, I shall be exhausted in a much shorter time. Then I must return to my own place and people, as the food on which you rely—and the Dwellers also—is of no use to me. I ask this—is it better that we should continue to share the strength I have, or should we find food for your body, and so regulate our movements in future that we can make it self-supporting?"

I answered, though my body ached for the vitality on which it had learnt to rely, "I think that it will be wiser for us to conserve the strength you have, which we may need in days to come, when there may be no means of renewal. But it will make important differences, for which there must be allowance in the plans we form. I am used to sleeping at short intervals, because my accustomed day is only about a quarter the length of that which you now have; and even though I obtain regular and suitable food, I shall still be incapable of the rapid and prolonged exertions which I have endured with the stimulus of your hand to help me.

"It appears to me that we must commence our enterprise by penetrating one of the tunnels that open

on to the opal pavement. It is true that there must be other means of access inland, by which the Dwellers emerge in the daytime, but there are two reasons against attempting to use them. One is that we do not know their location, and though they may be nearer, it is equally possible that they may be more distant. The other is more serious. We are told that the Dwellers come up through the inland passages, and descend by those which are on the lower level. By choosing the latter, and following behind them when the night has fallen, we may reasonably hope that we shall be able to enter their abodes without encountering any who are coming in the opposite direction. In addition to these reasons, it occurs to me that the country inland is of an extremely forbidding and mountainous formation, and though the Dwellers are able to traverse it, it might be absolutely impossible for us to do so."

MY COMPANION answered with her usual equanimity, "It is a choice which must be made, and your decision contents me. But I notice a quality in your reasoning which must, I suppose, introduce the adventure of your life to many avoidable difficulties. I think the arguments which you gave me were good, but they did not cover all the considerations which might influence such a decision, and of which I feel sure you could have thought, had you wished to do so.

"It appears to me that you first elect your own preference, and then call upon your mind to furnish arguments to support it. It is not bound to do this, and it knows that you rely upon it to suggest any serious danger or difficulty which might impel you to alter your decision, but, no less, it understands your wish, and that if there be any sufficient arguments to justify your choice it is expected to find them. Like your body, it is separate from yourself, and may even work without your own awareness, but it is of a readier loyalty.

"I think, had you for any reason desired to adventure into the mountains, that your mind would have been quick to suggest that you could travel in greater security on the surface if you should avoid the paths which you have traversed already, where the Dwellers would be most likely to seek you. It would have used the argument of the unknown distance in an exactly contrary way, and it would not have failed to remind you that the tunnel which you have already explored contained no possible hiding-place, so that an alternative passage could not be worse, and might be better. It would have recalled that the whole length of the opal pavement is without any possible cover: that the bridge would be difficult for you to traverse in the darkness, while the Frogmouths would be dangerous in the

day: and that you have already been discovered once in the tunnel, so that it is at least possible that a watch has been set to take you there, should you again invade it.

"I could give you many more arguments of the same kind, but I am not resisting your plan. I am only interested in a method of decision which has, at least, the merit that it can operate more speedily than mine is easily able to do."

I HAD not thought her to be slow of decision when the need was urgent, but I felt that she had more to tell me, and I kept my mind open and receptive.

"You slept very long," her thought continued, "and I considered these things, after my own method. I first collected in my mind all that I have known of the Dwellers from the beginning, and of the things you have told me. I added that which I know of your own character and capacities. From these facts I endeavored to deduce a method by which we could succeed in our objects, if we be not already too late. I made little progress, for the facts are few and insufficient. But I made progress to this extent, that I realized that we are supposing some things which we do not know.

"In particular, you have shown me your mind, and I have seen that you visualize an end to these tunnels which opens into a hall, a chamber, or a large passage, or at least some public space, populated by the Dwellers, and where concealment for ourselves would be difficult, if not impossible. Your imagination may be correct, and it is a possibility for which we must be prepared. But in your mind it is less a possibility than an expectation, for which there is no sufficient ground whatever. Yet you had imagined it so confidently that I had difficulty in separating it from the facts you had shown me.

"I thought of this very long, and I see that your life is so brief, and so confusingly occupied, that you are obliged to proceed through a labyrinth of assumptions by which you hope to reach the thing you wish more rapidly than would otherwise be possible. But in this case, I cannot see that the assumption has any basis of probability.

"I know, from what you have shown me already, that you come of a race which has lived only on the earth's surface, and any cave or tunnel by which you enter it implies the approach to a confined and narrow space, so that when you attempt to visualize the condition of a race which lives under the surface, your imagination is of a cave, and not of a country.

"Now if the interior of the earth be completely solid, or nearly so, this imagination may be quite accurate. But is it? Neither of us knows. We do know from your own experience that the tunnels go down for many miles, though

we do not know their ultimate depth. That suggests that there must be some reason for so deep a penetration. To make such tunnels must have been a great labor. To descend and ascend them continually must be an unceasing toil. There must be some compensating advantage in the depth which is reached. The hollowness of the interior would supply it. But there might be quite different reasons. We know that there are areas of great heat that lie closely under the surface. There are parts of the ocean floor where this heat causes eruptions. Such areas may be of great extent. They may render it difficult or impossible to live under the surface till a greater depth is reached. True, the tunnels must penetrate this region, on this supposition, and it must therefore have been found possible to render them heat-proof.

"We have one other fact. The Dwellers reach the surface at very distant points. But this has no certain significance."

I ANSWERED, "I see the point you make, and I agree that I was inclined to a too-hasty assumption. Also, it enters my mind that if the earth be indeed hollow at a depth of a few hundred miles, and an inner surface be land only, it must be of far greater extent, not merely than this continent, but than the whole of the solid land of the earth's surface as I knew it, and as it appears to be today. It is also possible to imagine tiers of hollowed space in which such areas might be many times repeated, but the artificial creation of such tiers would require an amount of labor which appears stupendous and the dumping on the earth's surface of excavated material to an incredible volume."

She responded, "All that you think appears reasonable, and part is new to my mind. It would help us greatly if we knew whether the Dwellers are a numerous race, but of this I am able to tell you little.

"Before the time of the Great War, we believe that they dwelt on the surface only, or, at least, until a comparatively short period before it. Up to that time, for reasons into which I must not now enter, being irrelevant, we knew little of them, or they of us. That was about eleven thousand years ago.

"We know that they are bisexual, like the race from which you come. We suspect that their bodies age and decay, and are replaced by others, but of this we have no certain knowledge.

"In all the time I mention I cannot recall having seen more than two hundred of their men and three of their women. We do not suppose that they exist in these proportions. Our observation of the sea-creatures is that they cannot dwell in peace together unless their females are at least equally numerous, but we have seen those only who first negotiated the treaty with our Leaders, of

which you have been told, and such as have been in attendance at the fish-tanks. Of these I mention, I cannot recall that more than thirty have been seen at any one period. As the centuries have passed, there has been a gradual change. But this might only mean that they have exchanged to other duties. I have never seen one that showed signs of age, nor that was less than full-grown. The eight which we saw last night I had not seen previously."

I ANSWERED, "But, even in the absence of more direct evidence, the works which we have seen suggest that they are a numerous race.

"The protective belt which surrounds the continent cannot be less than five thousand miles in length, and it was twelve miles in breadth at the point at which we crossed it. Even for giants such as they, it would be an impossible task for a small community. Then we see that they patrol the coast, which must be the work of many."

She replied, "That is also probable, though not certain. We do not know that they patrol the whole coast. This region may be their headquarters, as I believe it to be. The work you mention is great, but so are their skill and knowledge. Their methods may be beyond our imagination. Or they may have worked through the agency of subject creatures.

"It seems that we have little certainty. Our safety must be in assuming nothing, so that we may understand the true significance of the facts that meet us.

"But our first purpose must be to gain the entrance of the tunnel by which we propose to descend. To do this we may retrace the path we came. But is this necessary?

"Our Leaders wished to recover the body which we are now seeking, and for that reason they had to go as far north as the second tunnel.

"They may have had other reasons, but, if so, I do not know them. If we choose to explore the one by which you descended, the distance must be much shorter across the wide valley which lies beneath us, and the way does not appear impracticable. The crossing of the farther hills, and the descent of the cliffs, may be difficult and in this strange world there may be dangers in a new way of which we can have no foresight. It is certainly shorter. It will avoid the long transit of the opal path which is perilous if they should be watching to take us. But I do not pretend that I think it the safer way. It is the doubt that calls me."

I answered, "I do not think it the safer way either. I have lost the axe on which you have seen that I relied for any defense I could make against the creatures which threatened me. I have also lost my knapsack, and with it all the necessities I carried, except such small things as my pockets held. I have a damaged arm, and a lame foot. I think

that I shall be unable to move more than slowly, however urgent the call. But if you are not afraid to venture with one so useless beside you, it is the doubt of the unknown way that calls me also."

She answered generously, "You are too good for the body in which you live. I have the javelin still, and, as I said before, we will pass in peace, or there will be one that will sorrow."

Chapter Two

THE UNKNOWN WAY

I DID not ask, for I remembered our compact, and I closed my mind securely against her doubt of my welfare, but there are times, with thought as with the spoken word, when silence is of an equal significance.

"It is in my mind," she told me, "that the intention which we have formed to feed your body when next we may, will give it no strength beforehand. It is in my mind, also, that the food of the Killers would hardly please you, if we could find it amid the ashes.

"Beyond this, I think that the Dwellers may return very early to resume their investigation of events

which (I hope) are still of some mystery to them, and that it is well that we should be clear of this place before the darkness leaves us."

Again I felt the silk-soft palm in mine, and the slim webbed fingers closing, and again the current of her finer life possessed and thrilled me.

It was a reluctant pleasure, since I had realized the concealed repugnance with which she touched me, but my need was too great, and the wisdom of her action, in our common interest, too evident for me to refuse.

"I am stronger now," I replied, after a time, "shall we start?" and side by side we let ourselves down into the darkness.

Clear of the shelter which had protected us, I was conscious of a thin cold rain, and of a chilling wind from the north, which penetrated the leather rags that I had no longer the means of stitching together, and made me glad to move my stiffened limbs as rapidly as I could, while we crossed the enclosure, to where the still-smouldering ruins gave a dim, unearthly light from both before and behind us.

I drank again at the pool-side, while my companion dived for a moment in the cool darkness. We passed near enough to the great tank for her to see that there was no longer any water within it. To this end, the Dwellers must have taken some action while the fire still burned, for our vice of curiosity led us backward to view it, and she showed me that the bodies which it contained were charred beyond recognition.

Then we made for the gap in the barrier of the burning ashes where the gate had been, and left that desolation behind us for ever.

As we passed out, our steps were lighted for some distance by the glow from the line of smouldering ashes beside us, but the darkness became denser at every yard as we turned from it to cross the plateau. Yet she went on swiftly, and, in the confidence that her hand supplied, I found no difficulty while the level ground continued. When the path fell roughly I held back to a slower pace, and even then I stumbled frequently. "Can you not see at all?" she asked, "for if we can do no better than this our plan must be altered. We have eighty miles to cover before the dawn, if we are to reach the valley woods while the night-time cloaks us."

I answered, "I cannot see when the darkness is absolute, and you go forward as though the day were round you. I suppose that other creatures are like me in this, or how would the darkness aid us? Can your eyes see when there is no light whatever?"

SHE replied, "When there is no light whatever, I can see nothing that is more than a few yards away, but within that space

it is not my eyes only, it is my whole body that perceives what is around it. I do not see, but I know. My body is too much alive to walk into any tree that confronts it. But we must do something. If you would keep your mind blank and ready, I think I could show you always for a few steps before us."

This we tried, and for many hours we went forward with the way visible to me for about three yards ahead, and, beyond that, blackness. It was difficult, and very tiring, for neither of us could think at all, but we made good progress. Steadily she kept me aware of things before me, but more than once my own mind wavered, and in a moment I was stumbling in the darkness. And the darkness did not lift at all. There came a cold and steady rain, without wind, which descended straightly upon us. My rags were quickly drenched, and for the most part of the remaining night this rain continued pitilessly.

Our way was often very rough, and in the darkness we could not choose it. We could only go forward directly, and take what came. For the most part we descended, but not regularly. The ground we crossed was not cultivated in any evident way, nor was it enclosed or protected—or not till we had crossed the lake, and that was later.

At times we walked on a prickly growth of some kind that was too close and stiff for our feet to break it. Often we walked, or, I might say, waded, through herbage such as we had encountered on the previous day, making our progress slow and heavy, but always her buoyant vitality sustained me.

Once we found the ground falling precipitously before us, and discovered that we were on the bank of a river. We could not tell its width, and my companion's suggestion that we should swim it found me unwilling. Bearing leftward, we continued beside it for some miles, and then found it had left us. It was about here that we began to feel touches as of light hands on the face, in a place where trees were frequent. I was frightened at first, till I realized that they were only trailing leaves—creepers, I thought, but they were really the trees themselves, as we saw when the daylight came.

BUT the real horror of the night was at the last. For some time the ground had been flat and bare, soft from the rain, which had now ceased, but easy to traverse, so that we increased our pace, and were making good progress, when we found our feet sinking in a shaking bog, from which we pulled them with difficulty. Then it was firmer again, and then softer at times, till we were in a swamp which became worse as we went forward. For a moment we stopped, and I found myself in darkness, as my companion's mind asked me, "Shall we not go back, if we can?

If we sink deeply in such slime we cannot swim or live. Nor can either of us think clearly while I show you the way. If we move from the straight line ahead we should remember our turns. Shall I lead you only?"

I agreed, and we turned back, as we thought, with exactness. Indeed, it must have been so at first, for she saw the marks we had left, but it was unexpectedly difficult. I was in darkness now, following the guidance of her hand, and content to think that her own sight and thought were concentrated on getting us clear of the swamp, when I suddenly felt her sinking beside me.

Cool, but urgent, her mind called me, "I have no footing: pull." I was up to my ankles in the slime, and found my foot slipping from beneath me as I leant away from her. (For I had been at her left hand previously, but when we turned back we had changed hands, not positions, and I was now on her right.) A step ahead, it was firmer ground. A struggle to the right, and she had footing once more. Then I went in deeply. After that we moved as best we might. One only at a time, and feeling each step carefully. I lost sense of direction entirely. And it was there —or nearly there—that the dawn found us.

But that was after—well, I cannot hope to describe it, but I must tell it as best I can.

It was fortunate that our minds were in closest touch at the moment, or the second's interchange of thought might have been a half-second later, and there my life would, I suppose, have ended.

Her own mind was alert to give me the indications that her sight supplied, when it suddenly changed to a great doubt, paused on the brink of consternation, recovered to the high gaiety with which it was accustomed to encounter peril, shot me a thought-swift warning, reverted to its poised serenity, and closed from me entirely; and, in the slow process of words the warning that she gave was this—

"We come here of good right, fearing none, and we mean no harm to any. Therefore we move in security. Our minds are serene and friendly, and we walk at peace with all things. If you doubt or fear we are both lost entirely. As your body fought the Killers with the axe for both of us, so my mind fights for both now. You must help now, as I helped then. I have passed you the javelin, for there is no use for weapons here, and I must not hold it. All is well. Be quite sure to believe it. Step as I guide you. Jump when I call on you, I will tell you just how far. Separate now."

THE whole thought was instant, and in the same moment I knew that that on which we walked was swaying beneath us.

Her hand pulled me quickly to the left, and we ran up something that moved from under us like a treadmill—if we had been on the outside of the wheel—jumped at last, landed on something smooth and slippery, like that which we had left, and having—the thought crossed me—a living softness. Then I caught my foot, stumbled, recovered, jumped again, clambered a few yards of rising ground, slimy enough, but firm also, and felt the soft touch on my cheek that I had felt before, and knew that trees were round us.

We went on for a hundred yards, while the ground sloped upward. Then it commenced to fall away, and we stopped at once. There we stayed, and there, at last, the dawn found us, still distant from the cover which we had aimed to reach in the darkness.

We were on a narrow twisting tongue of land, perhaps fifty yards broad by two-hundred long, the conformation of which had betrayed us to the swamp in the darkness. On the left hand it merged into bog and water, with occasional islands of verdure, and scattered trees. On the right hand was the deep water of the great lake that we had seen from the mountains two days before.

The sun had not yet appeared above the ridge of higher ground that ran between us and the sea, but the faint light of dawn was sufficient to show us a mile-width of still water, and beyond it a level of woodland of great trees, the extent of which, from the low ground on which we stood, we could not determine.

The few trees that surrounded us were of a different character. Most of them were of the kind that had touched us in the night so weirdly. They had trunks of a livid white, not more than eight feet high, from the top of which a cluster of rising boughs rayed outward. On the length of these there were no leaves, but large flowers of a very brilliant scarlet only, while at the end of every bough grew a cluster of long ribbon-like leaves of a bright green, that hung downward, almost to the ground in the still air, or fluttered very lightly when the wind stirred them. I was not sure whether I thought them beautiful, or strange only. I had an unreasonable feeling that they were unfriendly.

IN THE hollow of one of these tree-tops, where the branches rose, there sat a duck-billed bird, of a halcyon blue color, and of the size, and somewhat of the shape, of a partridge. As the dawn widened, it rose and flew outward, not crossing the lake, but going up the mid-water, to the right where the lake extended for many miles, gradually widening.

"It does not fear us at all," I remarked to my companion, before it rose to leave us.

"I made peace in the night with all things," she answered, "come and see. You will know that it was needful."

I walked with her to the end of the tongue of land on which we stood, and, where the lake and swamp were mingling, there were huge shapes that wallowed in the mud like gigantic tadpoles, but with two fore-limbs, short and thick, and ending in a row of claws of great length. A hippopotamus would have been small beside them. The most part of the head was a large-toothed mouth, flat and shallow, with one down-curving tusk, growing like a hook from the center of the upper jaw. There were two large circular eyes, on the top of the flat head.

"They were lying closely," she told me, "in the deeper mud. We were walking on or slipping between them for some time before I knew they were living.

"It was only as one of them waked to consciousness of us, and began to roll over, that I became aware of that on which we were walking.

"I knew that he had already decided to spill us in the mud, so that he should reach us the more easily, and that if the others should combine against us we should be helpless. They are the Dwellers' creatures, not of the sea, and for a moment I almost had the doubt which would have destroyed us. But I think I have not ruled the monsters that the oceans hold for so long, to lose my body at last in such talons. Also, you did well.

"A javelin, such as this, is a cunning weapon, and I had joy when I used it, but I think that our ways of peace are greater than those which you are designed to practice.

"You see the monster that still has his tusk hooked on to that projecting root, to steady him while he slept in the shallow? It was in the edge of his eye-socket that your foot caught when you stumbled."

Chapter Three

THE PERIL OF THE LAKE

WE WATCHED for some minutes while the giant leviathans lazily moved themselves from the mud-shallows to the deeper water. They seemed half-asleep, and very slow, and somewhat clumsy, as they did so, with no life in the flat unlustred eyes, and a thought crossed me as to whether they were really as formidable as my companion had supposed them, when I noticed that one of them, who had moved out a short distance, had sunk his head, and raised his tail, as duck does when it feeds under water.

Suddenly his tail waggled in an uncontrolled excitement, and in an

instant a dozen of these huge creatures had flung themselves at the spot.

Those that were already in the deeper water drove like huge torpedoes toward it.

Those that were still in the shallows propelled themselves at almost equal speed with huge clawgrips and flapping tails through mud and water.

So great was the converging rush that the spot at which they aimed was splashed bare for an instant, and we saw that tusks and claws were tearing up the muddy bottom in chase of something that was burrowing deeply to avoid them. The next moment something of a dirty-white color, and of the size of a small cow—but we could not see clearly—was dragged out and torn to pieces.

Then with contented grunts, and a switching of great tails, they swam out phalanx-shape into the deep water, where they dived together, and the still lake gave no sign of their presence.

It was after this that my companion closed her mind from me, as she would do when a doubt came which she could not quickly answer.

At last she told me, "It is in my mind that we have done wrongly to come this way. The morning is here, and we have not reached the forest which should be our immediate safety. Between us and it the swamp is extending far on the left, and the lake for many miles on the right. If we try to go round on either hand, I have little doubt that we shall be observed from the heights behind us, where the Dwellers will be patrolling.

"If we hide through the day, we shall have a long way to go over the low land, which we have proved to be an evil path in the darkness, and to cross the hills beyond may be still more difficult. Besides that, the delay is misfortunate, for we should not arrive at the tunnel-entrance at the beginning of the night, as we had planned to do."

I replied, "Can we not swim the lake?" and surprised a thought of relief and wonder in the mind that heard me.

She answered, "I could, of course, do so very easily. I should swim under the water, and land beneath the cover of the trees upon the farther bank. But I supposed that you could only swim on the surface, if at all, and that in any case the distance would be beyond your power."

THE answer annoyed me, for her contempt of my physical capacity was always hurtful, friendly and entirely reasonable though I knew it to be, and I had always accounted myself an accomplished swimmer.

I said, "I have swum longer distances. I can swim under water for a short time, if necessary; but one

of us swimming on the surface will be far less conspicuous than two walking on the bank and we shall be out of sight very much sooner. Besides that, if we are seen and chased, we shall have a far better opportunity of escaping."

I do not think my reply quite satisfied her. I saw that she thought I was illustrating the habit of collecting all the available arguments for a course that I had pre-chosen, of which she had already accused me, but after a moment she answered equably, "It is far best, if you are sure that you can do it; and for myself it is far pleasanter. If we are going that way, it is foolish to stand here longer, where we may be observed that much more easily.

"But can you swim in those rags, or will you not at last discard them?"

I think that most people would have hesitated, as I did. I could not swim such a distance encumbered by the clothes I was wearing. I could make them into a bundle in such a way that they would not impede me too greatly. All my instincts were against their abandonment. There were still a few things in the pockets which I greatly valued—my old clasp-knife—some matches—some cord—a note book (but I had made no use of this, so far)—some small scissors—a razor, and a quantity of spare blades. But I knew that the rags I wore in this new world exposed me to the contempt of every eye that beheld them. To be modest is to be inconspicuous. It is to follow the mode. By that test my present clothes reached the last extreme of indecency.

I had no means of stitching them further, and the rough usage they had received had already caused such damage that they would dispense with me, if I did not dispense with them very promptly.

I considered temperature, but the sun was already gaining power, and I knew how warm it became on the lower levels in the daytime.

UNDER the surface I knew that I had found the tunnel to be of a comfortable warmth.

I took off my boots, and knew that the operation was final. A sole already tied with string on the previous day was now entirely loose. The other was scarcely better. The uppers were leaving me by successive details. My socks—what was left of them—were clotted with dirt and blood.

My companion watched the gradual revelation with amused and lively eyes, but she hid her thoughts from me as it proceeded.

In the end, public opinion was too strong for me. All my life I had made myself grotesque in the ugliest garments by which the human form can be hidden, because my fellow-men required this symbol of modesty.

Here I was conscious of a differ-

ent verdict, and the slave crouched instinctively to the crack of a new whip.

On a sudden impulse, I resolved to leave them.

I wrapped my small possessions in my waistcoat, which was still a fairly sound garment. I tied it securely. Then I threaded a piece of cord through the button-holes, which I fastened round my waist, so that the little parcel could be easily carried behind me.

I made of the boots and other garments a bundle which I resolved to sink in the lake, so that there should be no sign left of our presence, and we dived into the water together.

The lake was smooth, and the water was not too cold to be pleasant. It became clear and very deep as we left the bank behind us. I swam strongly at first, rejoicing in the morning freshness of sun and air and water, and buoyed by the exhilaration of my companion's mind. But a time came when I looked with doubt at the distance of the wooded headland which we had agreed to make our objective. The shore was far off, but yet I seemed to have made no progress to the one before us.

My comrade swam beneath, but not closely. In the delight of her recovered element she dived and rose, and swam beneath and round me, with a speed and ease that did nothing to encourage me to satisfaction with my clumsier efforts.

I had a strong desire to call on her for the vitality of which I was learning to rely too absolutely, but against this I fought with a stubborn wish to show her that I was not entirely incapable, even in an unfamiliar element.

For a moment she stayed quietly beside me, sliding through the water at the same pace as myself, but without apparent effort, while she rose sufficiently to view the scene around her.

"Look back," she suggested suddenly, and I changed a stroke which was becoming wearier than I was willing to recognize, so that I might turn my eyes to the distant heights behind us.

I SEARCHED them, but could see nothing of interest. Once I thought that there was a flicker of flame on the hillside, but it was too minute and far off for any certainty, and the next moment I had lost it entirely.

"I'm afraid your sight is not much use, even in daylight," she considered, "but please swim as low as you are able, for the Dwellers may not be equally deficient."

"There is one who has scraped together all the ash and litter of the burning, and it has flamed up afresh."

I changed to the breast-stroke, and she sank to three feet under the surface, as I answered, "I suppose they will make an end of it entirely. Is it because of the For-

bidden Thing, and do they, I wonder, wrongly blame the Killers for using it?

"I cannot understand why they should object to fire so strongly. In the world from which I come there are so many inventions less useful and with greater potentialities of mischief; and their own works show that their engineering skill and practice is advanced beyond the knowledge of my contemporaries."

She answered, "Perhaps it is only that they do not wish the creatures that they allow to live on the surface to develop knowledge. I can only guess, as you can. But we are likely to learn many things before the next dawn comes, though we may not see it."

I DID not answer, for a trailing growth of water-weed had caught my left leg, and I kicked free with difficulty. The next moment I was surrounded by the floating growth, and I was some moments under water before I could release myself sufficiently to continue.

My companion regarded me with the merriment which my bodily difficulties always prompted, only now it was more irrepressible, because she was intoxicated by the joyous freedom that the water gave her, after so long an absence from her accustomed environment.

"Is it really so," she asked, "that if you were below the surface for more than a few moments your body would become useless beyond repair, and you would die out of it entirely? and did you know this when you offered to swim so far across the surface?"

"It is true enough," I answered, "but I have no intention of drowning. In my world, we live dangerously in many ways, and when there is sufficient necessity we take such risks as we must, and we have contempt for those who will not take them."

"It is very well," she replied, with a mocking gaiety of mind which would not quieten, "but the contempt of your fellow-men is a somewhat distant eventuality; and as I desire your company when we invade the tunnel of the Dwellers, I hope you may decide that the risk will still be sufficient if you swim in some other direction."

I replied, "I am swimming to the nearest point at which we can land, and at the best pace I can. I do not know what better I can do, unless I am to sink to the bottom. But if you can give me any reason why I should not swim in this direction I shall be genuinely glad to have it."

She said, "I can give you two, and they are both rather good ones. Let me show you them as I see them."

She then gave me a most unwelcome vision of a mass of floating weed through which to swim would be hopeless, and downward,

through clear water below it—for it was not rooted—to where our acquaintances of the morning lay scattered on the lake-floor, with wide unwinking eyes looking upward, doubtless for the capture of any prey which might be caught in the green snare above them. I do not think it needs excuse that the sight appalled me. We were in the very middle of the lake, and I was tired already.

"How far do the weeds extend?" I asked.

"I cannot say. It is farther than I can see. If you will turn and rest for a minute, I will find out which way we can best attempt to go round them. But swim quietly backward, for you will not wish to rouse our friends below while I am absent. I know that when you meet any strange thing your first thought is to fear, and then to fight it, but as your axe is gone, and you would not find it easy to reach your clasp-knife, I suggest that you should not take the risk of rousing them."

I agreed very heartily, although I knew that she mocked me, and, indeed, the idea of using an axe in the water to defend myself from such an attack was sufficiently comic, as she telepathically visualized it to me.

The fact was that now she was in her natural element the idea of any living thing within it provoking either fear or hostility had regained its normal absurdity. Had she been alone, I knew that she would have dived beneath the weeds at once, without a second glance or thought for the creatures that lay below her.

She had left now, and I swam back for a short distance, and then turned on my back, and floated on the sunny water, glad of the rest, but becoming increasingly frightened as I reflected that at any moment I might find myself in the grip of those wide flat jaws. I understood why these beasts had their eyes so flatly placed, as I recalled that unwelcome vision. How far could their sight extend to the surface of the lake above them? Were they resting oblivious of such small things as I, that might be swimming in the water, or did they watch there, as a kestrel hovers, ready to rush upward at the first sight of their expected prey?

I was somewhat reassured, as the moments lapsed, by a shoal of silvery fish which passed me. They were as long as salmon, but much slimmer, and they swam in a long line two or three broad, straight toward the place of danger which I was avoiding. They, at least, had no cause for fear, unless they were too stupid to know, or sufficiently agile to avoid it.

AND then she was again beside me:

"It is not very far round on the left, and there is clear water for a long way forward: There is a cold

spring at the bottom when we have rounded the weed. The water there is purer than the lake itself, and I am desirous to bathe in it. If you swim on, I shall catch you up very quickly. But we will stay together till we are clear of this place."

We swam on, side by side, in silence. I was already aware that I must conserve my strength to the utmost, if I were to reach the shore unaided. After a short distance, the weed receded so that we were able to approach the shore obliquely, and then it disappeared from before us, and again we could head straight forward.

It was here that my companion left me. I knew that she was in some doubt as she did so, for she asked me whether I would not prefer to float only, till she could rejoin me. But I was anxious to get forward while my strength lasted, and I had caught a glimpse of her mind, from which I knew how keenly she desired and needed her intended pleasure, so I answered only, "I will go on. You will catch me easily. The farther I leave the beasts behind us, the better pleased I am. But you will keep your mind open, in case there should be anything to let you know."

"Surely," she answered, and the next instant had left me.

The headland was nearer now, and it was with the hope that the struggle would soon be over that I settled down to swim the remaining distance. Once I called to my companion, and she gave me a sight of herself as she lay with lifted fur on the lake-floor, and let the cold stream go through it. But, for the most part, I tried to think of distant or abstract things, to turn my mind from the weariness which now made every stroke an impossible effort.

Then a swell came from the left hand, as though a large boat were passing at no great distance.

I looked round in wonder, but for a moment I could see nothing to cause it.

Then a huge black body rose from the water, like an enormous porpoise, and turned a somersault which sent a heavier swell across the level surface of the lake.

My stroke quickened without conscious effort as I beheld it. But at the first moment I was not greatly frightened. It was evident that it did not pursue me, and my course was not toward it. Fortunately, I called my companion, and the answer, "I am coming now," was unperturbed in its promptness. I had an instant's vision of her, as the loose fur contracted, and the slim swift body shot forward.

BUT the next minute was rapid in thought and action.

My mind called urgently, "There is another one that has risen nearer."

"They may not see you while they are on the surface. Their eyes look upward only."

"They may do so, as they roll in their gambols—I think they have done so now. They are both coming."

"I am coming quickly."

"It is useless. What can you do against them?"

The two huge brutes were racing over the surface in their competition to secure me, with a speed which would have left a motorboat behind very quickly. I could not doubt that in twenty seconds they would be quarrelling over my divided body.

MY TERROR warned her only to avoid the danger which must destroy me.

"Refuse fear," she called back, "it is that which gives them power to destroy you."

But fear I must, and as she realized it, I think—though I am not sure—that there was a second during which her own mind faltered. But if so, it was for an instant only. Then she realized the full peril of the moment, and her courage rose to meet it.

Cool and swift, and very urgent, she thrust forward the full force of her mind to overcome the panic which had possessed me. "I shall be first. Swim on. Listen. You are safe if you hear me. You must stop thinking. Give your mind to mine, and I can save you. Do not think at all, but believe it. It is everything that you do this."

The rest is a dream only.

I was dimly conscious that the first of the rushing beasts was upon me, and that it dived slightly as it came, so that it should snap at me from below. I saw the wide flat shovel-jaws open to take me, and then two things happened. Almost into the mouth of the gaping jaws she came between us—she had swum at least three times the distance that our opponents had covered—and at the same instant the second monster charged sideways into its rival in its eagerness to get a share of the expected dainty.

They were afraid of her, clearly. They both recoiled for a moment.

But it was clear also that they regarded me as a prey of which she had no right to deprive them.

On they came again from different sides, and into their very teeth she swam to thwart them.

Even so, had they been capable of concerted action, I do not see how she could have saved me. But she was cooler, swifter, more agile, with a mind that mocked them and bewildered. Nor was she content with defensive movements only, but as either would draw back for a moment, she followed the retreated mouth as though she dared it to harm her, as no doubt she did.

How it would have ended I cannot say, but at that moment fate interposed to help us. We were still a hundred yards from the shore, when the ground beneath us shallowed, and they pursued us no further.

We climbed out into a place of shade and of mossy softness, but I was too exhausted to regard it. Where I sank I lay. Perhaps, she was exhausted also. Anyway she gave me no thought, but remained in silence beside me.

After a time I slept.

Chapter Four

THE SILENCE IN THE WOOD

WHEN I waked, she was sitting looking into the water with brooding eyes in which amusement flickered more than once as I watched them, but which seemed, for the most part, to be puzzled by some thoughts for which she could find no solving.

She looked at me at last, and saw that I was awake, and offered me her mind in a moment.

"I am glad," she thought, "that I saved you, and I think that the Leaders will approve it; but of this I cannot be as certain as I gladly would be.

"As we were made companions in this enterprise, it seemed that it

was right to do so. But it is a law of our kind that, as no creatures in all the oceans will dare to harm us, so we do not interfere between them. Were we to withhold their prey from them, I cannot say that our immunity would continue. It is a thing so fundamental that from the beginning I have never known it attempted. We cannot be as one of themselves, and above them also. It comes to me again, as I have thought before, that you are like a seed of death to the world I know, and the end is beyond my dreaming."

I answered, "I owe you the debt of my life, and I cannot tell at how great a risk you have saved it. But I do not wish you to do things for me of which the consequences may be beyond our understanding.

"I thought to show you that I could cross the lake unaided, and I have only made my weakness more evident. I think it may be right that I should go alone in future; for when you called upon me first not to fear, I am aware that I failed you, and I suppose it was from that that the danger became so imminent."

SHE answered, "That is true; and by my code it may be right to say that you failed me, where it was beyond the power of your body (which is truly contemptible) to do otherwise. But I have thought, and see that by your own code I failed you for my pleasure only, for which I have no excuse of weakness to offer. I do not think another man would have left you, as I did. You think I showed courage because I interposed to save you, at some risk to myself.

"Whether there was risk I do not know; nor how great it may have been; but I think you showed a greater courage, being what you are, to go forward alone, and that, not to save my life, but to give me a needless pleasure, against which you might have protested reasonably.

"But we have still a long way to go before evening, and we shall do well to face the remainder of the journey, the difficulties of which we cannot tell till we meet them."

While we conversed in this way, I had been observing the scene around me. We had landed upon the edge of a forest of a more varied luxuriance than that in which we had rested upon the higher land two nights before.

Here, as elsewhere, I saw no sign of grass, nor of any similar straight-bladed growth, but the ground was covered by mosses, very deep and soft, and close-creeping herbage of other kinds in many shades of green and yellow. The trees were of many beautiful and unfamiliar forms, some of great size and height, but not too crowded to show their contours, nor the sky between them. Their foliage was of shades that varied from the

palest yellow to the deepest gold, with infrequent hints of red, and there was one broad-spreading bush which was entirely of a beetroot crimson.

It was very still—for the coming storms of which I had been told might bring rain in the night, but did not yet disturb the peace of the daytime—and of a beauty at which my breath paused for a moment, and of which I cannot hope to tell you.

But I was not looking for beauty. The need for beauty is continual, and for food is intermittent only. Yet the last is the more urgent while it remains unsatisfied.

It is true that man cannot live by bread alone, but it is equally so that he cannot live long without it. I remembered our compact that I should be self-supporting in future. I knew the swiftness with which my companion considered it natural to travel. I was aware of the importance, not merely of reaching the tunnel-entrance by nightfall, but of doing so in such condition that we should be prepared at once to explore it. I looked round in a natural anxiety to discover some means of nourishment.

I saw nothing to encourage hope, except that there was a curious fruit-like formation upon the hanging branches of a tree behind us.

THE leaves of this tree were very long and narrow, and of so light a yellow as to give an effect of whiteness, like the palest petals of the Californian poppy. At the root of many of the leaves there was a smooth-skinned tawny fruit, of the size of a loganberry. Opening it, I found that it was a fruit very certainly, containing a juicy pulp, and in the midst a single slender seed, of the size and shape of that of a lettuce. I tasted it cautiously, and found it delicious. My companion watched me with a friendly but unconcealed amusement.

After a time, she gave the glance by which I knew that she wished our minds to communicate.

"You have really no means of knowing," she asked, "whether they may assist or kill you? Is this because you are in a world of strangeness, or are you accustomed to this exciting uncertainty?"

I replied, "I have senses of taste and scent, which warn me that many things are unfit for eating, but they are not entirely reliable. The creatures of my kind depend largely upon tradition, as their own lives are too short to acquire much knowledge—and as, even were it otherwise, they would doubtless die in the experimental stages of obtaining it—and we eat such things as our ancestors have eaten before us.

"Here, my only method is to choose such substances as appear most like to those which I have known to be wholesome, and eat a small portion. If the taste be

good, and no ill consequence follow, in a few hours I can eat more freely."

"Your lives may be short," she said, "but, at least, they lack dullness. How shall you go bad, if it should chance to be a wrong thing that you are now eating?"

I controlled an impulse of irritation before I answered, "I shall not go bad, for I am testing the food very carefully. But I shall be the more careful because of the thoughts you have, and I may keep you here in consequence till you are tired of waiting. There are many ways of going bad for those who eat the wrong things, and none of them is pleasant."

"If your kind can avoid such poisons through their traditions, how do you know of the effects of many?" she asked me.

IT WAS ever so, when we commenced exchange of thought upon the world I had left, that the starting-point was quickly out of sight behind us.

"There are a variety of very poisonous substances, either vegetable or mineral abstracts, which can be mixed with food or drink without easy detection. As our bodies frequently break down through defective construction, or our own misuses, or from unavoidable hardships, before their final dissolution, we employ men to repair them and they make use of these poisons in minute quantities, and in the honest belief that we benefit from them.

"It follows that such poisons are prepared in great quantities, and are readily procurable.

"There is a custom among us of mixing one or other of these poisons in the food or drink of an acquaintance or relation whose life might be terminated to our advantage. Probably this custom is not very general, but that is difficult to judge, as it is practiced very quietly, owing to a law which provides that the neck of a successful poisoner shall be broken, after an interval of some weeks, during which they are kept alive in great mental agony." ("Do you mean that an unsuccessful poisoner would be treated with comparative leniency?" her mind interpolated. "Yes," I replied, "our laws always encourage incompetence.") However many of these cases may escape notice, it is usual to detect a few every year.

"The one who is considered to be the most likely to have committed the crime is then arrested, and all the available evidence is so arranged as (if possible) to prove his guilt. But strict proof is not necessary for a conviction in such cases, the practice being that the degree of proof required is in an inverse ratio to the repellent nature of the crime committed.

"I suppose that the great majority of those who are convicted are guilty, although, owing to the

way in which these trials are conducted, and the nature of the evidence which is accepted as conclusive, it would be a very simple matter for anyone of average intelligence to poison another in such a way that suspicion would fall upon some other member of the household, and it is not reasonable to suppose that this is never attempted successfully.

"But my mind wanders.

"At these trials it is usual to announce in public the nature of the poison used, the quantities required, the methods by which they may be procured, their effects, and the ease or difficulty with which they may afterwards be detected, and these particulars are distributed throughout the nation, so that anyone desiring to poison another need not be hindered by ignorance of such essential details.

"There is also, every year, a large number of people who destroy their own bodies, although we have (grotesquely enough) a law prohibiting this practice—and here, at least, we discourage incompetence, for we can only punish those who fail, the rest being beyond the reach of our cruelties—and a proportion of these people use poisons to effect their purpose, so that you will see that there is no difficulty in obtaining knowledge of the effect of such substances."

"I think," she replied, "that my Leader showed the accuracy of her judgment when she classified you as of the Bat-wing kind, though your race is, at least collectively, of a stupidity which it must be hard to rival throughout the ages.

"But tell me this. You have shown me already that there are many other species of animals which dwell in your world, and which you consider to be inferior, because you have the power to destroy them— Surely no conclusive reason!— Do they also suffer from the same disability, or are they better able to select their appropriate foods?"

I ANSWERED, conscious of the derision which laughed within her, and not entirely without a flicker of satisfaction, as I recognized that the ellipses of my thought confused her.

"It is true that for one species to have the power of destruction over another is a practical supremacy, and I may have impressed my thought upon you in that way without careful differentiation. To admit it absolutely would be to place the germ of a disease which we might be unable to conquer as beside or above us.

"We do consider that we are supreme of earthly creatures, but we could assert this supremacy on widely different grounds . . .

"As to your first question, the physical senses of the lower animals are more acute than our own, because they depend entirely upon them.

"Those that are allowed to live wildly, through our indifference, or in parts of the earth which we have not yet populated, appear to avoid unwholesome food without difficulty. But if they cause us any annoyance we are able to show our superiority by cunningly mixing poison with some attractive substance, by eating which they die very miserably."

"I am glad to think," she answered, "that there are some parts of your earth which are still clean," and then she received my thought in silence as it continued.

"But I must qualify my thought to this extent. There are numerous species of animals which we have subdued to our own purposes, and that we confine around us, either that they may do work on our behalf, or that we may eat their bodies, or both, and there is a diminished ability to avoid poisonous substances among these creatures, as their lives approximate more nearly to the condition of those who keep them— But this touches on much which would be long to explain, and I see that you do not understand fairly, if I give you the facts only."

She answered, "It is a wonderful world, and a very hideous. But I have much to ask concerning these creatures that dwell with you, and that you eat when they die. For the time, let us leave it."

While we had conversed in this way, I had been occupied in opening the small parcel of my remaining possessions, and drying them as well as I was able, their importance to me being too great for my mind to be seriously affected by the knowledge that she regarded them as a humorous evidence of my inferiority to every other created thing, though she admitted very frankly that the Dwellers were not entirely exempt from a corresponding necessity.

Now I made up my bundle again, and having eaten freely of the strange fruit, I expressed my readiness to explore the golden lights and shadows of the forest that lay before us.

WE HAD agreed that I should now depend upon my own vitality, even though our progress must necessarily be slower in consequence, but I rose and went forward very buoyantly, and though I knew that she was restraining her natural pace to keep beside me, I was well content to feel that I was moving with a lightness and energy which she could not have expected from any previous experience. There may have been some exhilarating quality in the food which I had just eaten, but, apart from that possibility, I had rested well, the air was pleasantly warm; and I had a sense of unaccustomed freedom from the rags which I had discarded.

Had there been a hard surface beneath us, I might have regretted

the impulse on which I had left my boots—though it would have been equally correct to say that they had left me—but the moss was soft and deep, and though it gave a curious tingling sensation (which I forgot subsequently), it was otherwise a very soft and pleasant carpet on which to tread.

The wood which we were now entering must have stretched (as I calculated) for about forty miles along the great valley which lay within the ridge of coastwise hills which we had to reach and cross to gain our objective. It was probably about ten miles wide at the point at which we were attempting to pass it.

We had gone about half-a-mile at a very quick walk, the trees not being sufficiently close to obstruct us seriously, when my companion asked me if there were nothing that occurred to me as unusual in the scene around us.

I had not thought of anything. I had been occupied by the beauty and variety of the trees which we were passing, but as she asked I felt it, and shuddered.

"Yes," I said, "it is the silence."

She answered, "Silence is good; but it is the cause of the silence. The trees live, but they do not move. I think that wind is forbidden. Besides the trees and the moss, it seems that we are the only creatures that live."

And I knew, as her thought reached me, that she was right. There was no moving life in the trees, nor in the air, nor in the moss beneath us. I searched, and if I could have found the smallest insect, I think it would have broken the spell which oppressed me, as I realized the isolation in which we moved.

I stood, and hesitated. I was ashamed of my thought, but at last I gave it. "I do not want to go farther."

"Do you feel it?" she answered. "I felt it sooner."

"It is not that I fear," I answered, "there seems no cause to fear in so great a peace, but I find it hard to go forward."

"Yes," she said, "the Dwellers may not be here, but I think that they have left their wills to protect it. It is a new thing to me. Shall we yield, and turn, or resist it?"

I HESITATED for a moment, for I felt a curious disinclination to go farther, beneath which there was a stubborn unwillingness to turn back with so little of reason to justify it.

"It must be a long way round," I thought at last, "and it might be even more perilous. You shall decide."

She answered readily, "Then we will go forward. I will go first, if you will, because I am the more sensitive to the power against which we shall be contending, and I may also be more resolute to resist it.

"I know that you were trying to decide in this way, though you found it hard to do so.

"My own decision is not because it is a long way round, which is of little moment, nor because it may be more dangerous to take that way, for it may be less so, which is more probable. But I think that these were not your reasons. They were only those which your mind supplied, as best it might, to support your preference.

"You know, as I do, that there may be great danger if we go forward, though you cannot understand what it may be. Therefore you fear it. But you have within you a spirit which has been trained to conflict by the conditions of your life, and which is reluctant to turn aside from a chosen path, and especially so when the danger is not immediately evident, nor physically apparent.

"My own reason is different. I feel that these woods are held by a power which will turn us back, if it be sufficient to do so. I suppose this power to derive from the Dwellers, because I know them to be supreme in these regions, and I cannot think that there could be any other whose wills could contend against my own so stubbornly. But it is in my thought that if we accept defeat here we may as well abandon our attempt at once. It is your nature to depend upon weapons for your protection, and you have none. It is mine to depend upon the assertion of my own will, and if, at the first challenge, we confess defeat without effort, in what confidence may we continue? We have this to think also. The Dwellers have much knowledge which is not ours, and many powers, but of the issue of such a conflict neither we nor they have had any experience.

"I supposed that the meeting of last night would resolve it, for I believed that my own people had determined to go straight forward, and that the Dwellers were resolute not to move aside to allow it. But the appearance of the lizards between them caused my people to halt of their own will, and the issue was not contested in that way."

THEN she went forward, and I followed closely behind her. Peace was round us, and a dream-like beauty, golden-green, and deep blue sky where the trees showed it. The stillness could be felt.

As the body feels when a great wind meets it, so that, though it stoop against it, it can make no headway, so was the pressure against my mind to hold me backward.

My companion gave me no thought, and I saw her go on slowly, but with no sign of effort.

As the pressure increased against me, my heart began to beat very violently. I became sick with terror. I forced each limb forward with difficulty, as though there

were a weight that dragged it backward. I concentrated my thought on the fear that if she should leave me I should be lost entirely, and strove with a despairing energy to lessen the gap between us, as it threatened to widen. And then, suddenly, I knew that the pressure ceased, and she looked back with laughing eyes, and a mind which was elate with victory.

The trees here became very dense, so that we could not see far ahead, and there were many of the fruit-bearing bushes, such as that on which I had fed before, that grew between them. I had a sense of great exhaustion, which I think she shared also, and we sat down and rested.

I saw that she was elated that we had not been turned by this obstacle, but I found myself less responsive to her mood than usual. I felt that we were confronted by powers which were entirely beyond our calculation, and against which we could make no effectual provision. I even doubted our present success.

"SUPPOSE," I suggested suddenly "that while we think we are victors, we are caught in a trap which we cannot break? Suppose a new danger were to confront us, how could we flee backward through the stubborn wall we have passed? Suppose that it is a circle through which return may be more difficult than the entrance?"

"We may suppose what we will," she answered happily, "and we may be right one time in a hundred, but what use is there in that? And such thoughts seem to me to be of a great folly, for by such means you make those against whom you should contend the more formidable. You defeat yourself. You are frightened by a new thing. It is new to me also, but it is no more wonderful than are many of the invisible powers of which you have told me, which are known to your own kind, and of which even the Dwellers—for all I know—may be ignorant."

I answered, though still unable to rise to her own mood, "I know that you are right when you say that I defeat myself, for it is the weakness of my kind to do so. Even in our wars, it is only rarely that a battle is fought out to the extremity of either side, but a moment comes when the spirit of confidence dies in one side or the other, and it retires or surrenders. Often, it is found afterwards that its opponents were dispirited also, and that the defeated could have been the victors had they endured for a short time longer.

"But your comparison with the powers of my own world gives me little encouragement. In our last war it was considered necessary to prevent people from crossing from one country to another. To effect this a wire fence was erected along the boundary. It looked harmless,

and easy to pass. Those who touched it died instantly, as by lightning. To an earlier generation it would have seemed incredible. How can we tell by what incredible-seeming horrors the Dwellers may be able to protect their territories?"

She answered buoyantly, "I agree with what you think, though not with the mood it induces. You are exactly right that we cannot tell, and it is useless to speculate. But the moment is ours, and I am content to have a mind untroubled.

"Why is it that your mind and body are alike in this, that they will fear when there is no cause, or a doubt only, but will rise above it when a cause confronts them. You are at least clear from the barbarisms of your own time, which appear to be such by your own telling that it is a marvel that any of you remain alive to endure them. And you can take courage from the thought that the Dwellers are not of your kind."

I did not answer further, for I was now rested, and had eaten freely, and with the physical comfort the mood was passing, but I had less confidence than she in the Dwellers, and a greater fear than I had felt before.

Chapter Five

THE TEMPLE

NOW the trees were thinner again, and of a changing character. They appeared to be a larger variety of those which we had encountered during the previous night. Light and graceful they rose around us, with a crown of spreading boughs from which long ribbon-leaves fell thickly. These leaves were many yards in length, of the width of a finger, and of an almost incredible lightness. The air was quiet, but not with the unreasonable stillness of the area of that forbidding will, and when a light wind moved, the leaves were lifted like a woman's hair, and blown aside, so that the

straight slim trunks showed nakedly between them.

Always these light leaves murmured with a stealthy whispering sound, so like to speech that I had a feeling that there were words which I almost heard, which I should catch if I should listen more carefully. I began to imagine that they were urgent to warn or threaten.

I turned to my companion's mind to break the spell they were casting, and found her receiving it with a like pleasure to that with which she bathed in the cold springs of the lake-floor.

Her mind paused reluctantly from its enjoyment to answer me when I queried in wonder how she should find a delight which approached to ecstasy in such a way, when I had understood that the sounds of speech, and (I supposed) all noise, were a barbarism that repelled her.

She answered, "You confuse things the most opposite. Is the beauty of bird or beast increased if it be torn open? The sea is full of sound, and like the wind it has many voices, which it contains within itself, as the air contains them. These voices are as the very basis of life to every sea-born thing. Even a dead shell cannot forget them. The unending murmur of these leaves soothes me with delight, while it arouses longing to return to the ocean-depths where there is neither noise nor stillness. Do you not hear that it is at once monotonous and many-toned, as all sound should be? Would not even such as you are shrink to violate it with the intolerable noises of the speech you practice?"

I did not answer, for her mind left me as it ceased its protest, and we went forward in silence, soothed to drowsiness of thought by this monotony of multitudinous sounds, till the trees ceased, and I was suddenly conscious that my companion was left behind, and that her thought was urgent and anxious to call me.

THOUGHTS that pass from mind to mind are swifter than speech, a thousand times, and more luminous. So it was that we had mutually realized in a moment that which would have been beyond the ready apprehension of human intercourse.

She stood back because she was confronted by a wall of blackness, where I saw sunlight, and a level lawn. It was not darkness that she saw, as that of night, but a blackness as of a curtain, gross and palpable.

When she knew that the way was clear to me, and that it held no visible menace, she decided instantly to go forward. "We will hold our purpose of boldness, as the better hope both of success and of safety. I will see with your mind, as you saw with mine in the nighttime."

I agreed, and we joined hands, and went on together.

Now, as we had found before, it is the disadvantage of this method of helping another mind that it hinders thought, so that I went on with my will fixed on conveying that which I saw to my companion, and could not reflect, or even wonder, without some blurring of the vision which I was transmitting.

The forest which we had left swept a wide forward curve on either hand around a level plain, on which was a circular building which must have been more than a mile in diameter. It consisted of a series of platforms, each receding from the one below. There were many of these, each about four feet higher than the last, and the central elevation must have been considerable, though the extent of the building dwarfed it. In color it was opalescent, reminding me of the pavement which I had first encountered, but it was of such extent and such beauty that the comparison is one of kind only.

So far as I could see from that position, it was crowned by a level platform. It was entirely silent: no life moved nor was visible.

ALL this I showed to my companion, who received it without interruption as we paused for me to view it, but when the survey was completed, and I would have continued our advance, I found her slow to follow, and it was only after an interval of irresolution that at last she told me. "I'm afraid. I have doubted whether we should go forward. There is a mystery here which awes me, whereas the unknown, or the perilous, has allured me always. I have thought backward as far as mind will reach, and the feeling is new. But, after this, I thought that we have taken a new road with minds aware of its danger. We may come through harmless, or with broken bodies, or, for all we know, we may be destroyed by forces which are beyond experience or imagination. But there is one thing that remains to our own wills, that if we fail we may do so conscious either of a bold or of a craven failure. Having lived so long, I have no will to perish with shame in my thoughts. You have walked when your sight failed, and I can surely do so. We will go forward together, and you can give me the sight I need, unless a greater urgency should require you. It may be that the darkness will pass, as did the pressure.

"But, perhaps, you are yourself unwilling to continue with a comrade so helpless? If you would rather that we turn aside, or that you go forward alone, I am content for it to be as you will."

I answered readily, "I am well content to go on together. I do not share or understand your feeling. So far as I can see them, the platforms are quiet and vacant, and nothing warns me of danger. It is

a strange thing that you cannot see, and may be ominous. But we have chosen a dangerous search, and we are little likely to reach success if we turn from shadows. To do so, would be (it is your own thought) to defeat ourselves, before any hostile movement should avail to thwart us. Let us at least go round the base of the building until we find whether the other side be alike. We might do this without penetrating the space within which you cannot see."

She answered, "Not by my will. For the fear is less since my resolution denied it; and how do we know that the higher platforms may not show us the entrance which we seek? Or that my sight may not avail when we gain them?"

But her sight did not return, and though I was able to convey the scene so that she walked confidently, yet our minds could not divert to the exchange of other thoughts —could, indeed, scarcely think at all, without reducing her to a darkness which was not merely such as I had experienced on the previous night, but blackness absolute and unrelieved.

We went straight upward from one circular platform to another, finding no change whatever. We walked on surfaces as smooth as polished granite, in some places of a milky opaqueness, at others of deep and multi-colored transparencies. Always before us was a wall of the same substance: climbing it, we found another similar platform to traverse. The outer edge of each curved very slightly upward, not more than a few inches, like the low rim of a gigantic saucer. It was nothing, proportionately, to the dimensions of the platforms themselves, but was enough to make me wonder how they were drained, when the rain fell. Then I wondered whether rain were allowed to fall in that solitude. Looking closely, I noticed, at the foot of the next wall, that there was a space of an inch or two between its apparent base and the platform beneath it.

APART from these apertures, which gave to each of the circular walls an appearance of being unsupported, there was no opening anywhere, as of door or window, nor sign of joint nor division in the whole extents of walls or platforms.

The colors before and beneath us were of innumerable variety, and of deep and glowing intensities, changing continually as we advanced. They changed, but did not flicker, nor sparkle. We walked on lakes of frozen fire, that faded as we advanced to the quiet green on an English sunset when the mists are windless. Here, I thought, might be the place of the birth of sunsets. Sometimes the approaching wall would show a violet color of an intensity which I had neither seen nor imagined, but this color was

never beneath our feet, nor could we reach it closely, for as we approached, it always changed and faded, if fading it could be called which was most often into a blue of more than peacock brilliance. But it was dull to the violet light which had preceded.

SO WE climbed unhindered, till we traversed a much wider platform than those below, and knew that the last wall was before us. It was higher than the previous ones had been, and we mounted it with some difficulty. We then saw a circular space of a diameter of about two hundred yards, and of an absolute flatness. It seemed that there was nothing more than the sides had shown already to reward surface at the center—so small a thing. A tiny point of light on the surface at the centre—so small a point. As we walked toward it I expected it to show more largely, but it did not do so. When we stood within a few yards, which was the nearest that we dared to venture, it was still too small for the eye to measure. It was a point without magnitude. I cannot say that it was embedded in, or that it lay upon, the surface. I cannot say that it was red or yellow: it was fire. It did not change or sparkle.

We stood there for a long time. I had no thoughts that I can translate to words. I have none now.

At last, we continued our way to the farther side of the platform, where we found a new reason for pausing. Beneath us lay the penultimate terrace which we had noticed to be so much wider than the others.

Where we had crossed it in ascending there had been no other difference. But here I looked upon the body of one of the Dwellers, who lay face-downward before us.

She did not lie on the flat surface, but in a shallow depression, hollowed to the shape of her body, which was half beneath and half above the surface of the platform on which she lay. It fitted her as though it were a mould in which she had been cast. It fitted her arms, that lay stretched straight and wide above her head. The whole attitude was one of grief or adoration. We watched, and saw no movement.

WE WALKED aside for some distance, before climbing down to the platform on which she lay. Having done this, I looked toward her, and saw that she was now standing. We remained motionless. We could merely watch. If she saw us there could be no escape nor evasion. We could not exchange thought, for my mind was occupied in conveying to my companion the vision of what I saw, but she contrived to let me know that it was as inexplicable to her as to me, and I remembered that she had told me that she had never seen more than three women among the Dwellers,

although she supposed them to be more numerous.

The one we now saw stood upright, showing a girlish slimness, her great size neutralized by the parity of her surroundings. She was gazing towards the point of light, her arms held down before her, and the joined hands twisting as in an extremity of controlled emotion.

Unlike the male Dwellers, she had hair on her head, abundant, though not long. It was golden-brown in color, and extended down the spine, a narrow lifted ridge. Otherwise the body was hairless. The back was the brown of a burnt biscuit, changing in front to rich cream-color. Otherwise, she might have been a woman of today or yesterday, with the grace and symmetry of a Grecian statue.

So, for a time, she stood, and then turned, and descended.

As I watched her do so, I became conscious that she could see no more than my companion. For though she walked confidently enough down what to her were no more than very wide and shallow stairs, I saw her twice put a foot forward, as with an instant's doubt, to feel the slight flange which rose at the edge of each platform.

BEFORE we descended farther, we walked to the edge of the hollow in which she had lain, and I had an impression of the enormous mould of a human form, as though it had been pressed in wet sand, but all the substance of that hollow showed the violet light of which I have told before, and though it did not flash nor shine into the eyes as sunlight does, but was, as it were, buried within the stone that contained it, yet it was of such intensity that my sight was lost as I saw it, and for some moments after I turned away I shared my companion's blindness.

It was inevitable that we should take much longer in our descent than had the Dweller, whose stride from platform to platform was so different from our shorter steps, yet when we arrived again on the level ground she was still there, and had turned to face the temple (if such it were) with thrown-back head, and uplifted arms, and an expression as of one who has been hopelessly repulsed, and yet makes one more appeal, not with expectation, but because it is intolerable to turn away, and to admit defeat which is final.

IT MAY be convenient here to explain certain facts regarding the Dwellers of which I learnt later, and in gradual ways. They had, in the course of numerous millenniums, developed bodies which were immune from disease, and (in comparison with our own) from accidental injury also. So far as their experience showed, there was no physical deterioration, nor any reason why they should not continue indefinitely. Yet their solution of the problem of longevity proved in-

ferior to that which had been evolved by the Amphibians, in an unforeseen way. In our own race, we know that the desire of life may persist in a body which is both old and organically defective, and that the brain is usually the last stronghold of a vitality which is reluctantly surrendered. Their experience was opposite. A time would come when the body functioned, but the mind grew weary. Year by year, an increasing lethargy would be succeeded by a more active desire for death, till the slow operation of their own will-power would destroy their bodies through the misery of its final centuries. To the young, this condition would appear incredible, and they would confidently boast that they would resist it successfully, but, sooner or later, it would inevitably descend upon them.

Such was their individual doom: as a race they lived under a darker shadow. When it became evident that they had so far overcome the threats of disease and decay that the individual might continue indefinitely, they had naturally been concerned rather by the fear that there might be an ultimate congestion of population, than that the race should fail in fecundity. But this fear had not been acute, because they were then engaged in exploiting a new, and seemingly almost limitless, subterranean territory. Also, they passed through a period of warfare with the inhuman population of other portions of the earth's surface, in the course of which many of them were destroyed, and which remained as a continuing menace when the actual conflict ceased.

THEY had learned that though the lives of their women were prolonged indefinitely, their power of procreation did not continue, and they had first observed, immediately after the war of which I have spoken, that the children that were born were males in a considerable majority. They were not alarmed at this circumstance, which those who specialized in such matters assured them to be of a temporary character, either because (as some held) their males had been weakened in strife, and their boldest and strongest killed, and it was (they said) a natural law that the young should be of the sex of the weaker half of the community; or (as others held) because the spirits of the dead were reincarnated, so that, in time of warfare, an excess of male births was a natural consequence of the fatalities which preceded them. With all their wisdom they could not resolve this question with certainty. They were not even agreed as to whether there were any necessary relation between the births and deaths that occurred among them, or whether, should they cease entirely to die, new spirits could be incarnated indefinitely from the Unseen.

But the war ceased, and the years passed, and the excess of male births did not cease, but augmented continually. Many troubles resulted, many expedients were tried, many laws were passed, but this condition persisted.

At this day, while the males and older females must have numbered tens and may have numbered hundreds of thousands, there were less than seventy women of marriageable age alive, and of some two score of children there were three girls only.

AS THE Dweller stood thus, a feeling of desolation came upon me, settling into a dull despair, which I had no force to combat. It may have been the attitude in which she stood, solitary and silent, in that strange setting, the vacant beauty of the temple before, and the golden circle of the woods behind her, her arms lifted in dumb protest against the inexorable destiny which overshadowed her.

It may have been her attitude only, or it may have been more than that, as I realized later.

For when at last she cast down her arms with a gesture of impotence, and turned with bowed head, and descended into some cavity of the ground, my companion opened her mind toward me, and the shadow darkened as she did it. Then her thought grew clear to this issue—"When you have shown me the dark things of the time from which you came, I have been curious, or repelled; or I have sympathized or marvelled only; yet it has been as unreal as is a reflection in water. But here I find it close, and very terrible. Its meaning is beyond me, but I had not imagined that the world could hold such sorrow . . . It is strange that we could receive thoughts which were not directed to us, but it may be that when they are cast loose in such intensity of petition they may be received by all who are near them."

I replied, "That is scarcely so, for I saw only, and her thoughts were hidden."

She answered, "It may be that you do not receive the thoughts of the Dwellers as easily as we do, or as you receive ours, or there may be another cause, but to me her thought was clear and vivid, though it was formless, being a desire that was so strong that it could endure with little hope to support it. I do not know for what she asked, but I think she called for help which will not be given. I can show you her thought."

Then she gave me the prayer which had gained so unexpected an audience, and my mind was filled at once with a sense of intolerable calamity, and with the cry of one who knew that the time for hope was over, and who struggled to reject a despair which would be beyond her endurance, so that her

mind beat lamentably against the repulse of closed and indifferent doors.

I SUPPOSE it to have been because her trouble was of a nature more easily explicable to myself than to my companion that I found in the transmitted thought a more concrete quality than she had recognized as she received it.

I could not tell the cause of her calamity, or its incidence, but I became aware that it was the impending destruction of her race against which she pleaded, and that this was joined in some undisclosed manner with a personal grief, the larger shadow being a connected background to the more imminent catastrophe.

It was not evident that we were concerned in the troubles of any one of the Dwellers, or in their general welfare. Indeed, their perils or preoccupations might contain our safety. They were alien from, and might be contemptuously hostile to, my own humanity. Yet the depression of that telepathy would not lift, and it was with a sense of overhanging tragedy, illogically enough, that we advanced to investigate the cavity by which she had descended.

The ground declined as we approached it, becoming a rounded channel or guttter, down which we moved, the temple on our right, and the surface soon above the level of our heads on the left. We must have descended thirty or forty feet when we came to the lowest point, the ground commencing to rise before us, and at the same time we became aware of the entrance to a tunnel on our right which sloped down and inward beneath the temple.

In dimensions it reminded me of the tunnels beside the opal path with which I was already familiar, but it was otherwise different. There was no vertical rod, such as that which had drawn the eyes, and stayed the pursuit of the Frogmouths. There was no difference between floor and walls, but all were marble-smooth, and hard, and cold. They were opalescent, but of a kind and color which I had not seen previously. The sides and roof were of the dim green of the undersurface of an arching wave, and like a wave they curved over, differing from the upright walls and flat ceiling of the earlier tunnels. The floor gave an impression of dark green depths through which we could have seen to the remoteness of the earth's interior, had the faint light allowed it.

WE HAD ceased to think as we moved forward, so that I might once again give to my companion the benefit of the sight she lacked, and it must have been my own volition that caused us to take a few steps within the entrance of the cavity. But as we did so, her thought broke sharply across my own, "You need show no more: I

can see here." It was a relief that did not lessen the marvel. She showed me that the blackness still fell like a curtain over the very mouth of the cavity, where I looked out into sunlight, but the gloom within was alike to both of us, and in the relief of this renewed equality we sat down, not very prudently, against the wall of the passage, forgetting its potential dangers in the pleasure of needed rest, and in the necessity of reconsidering our position.

"The question is," I began immediately, "shall we continue the plan we made before we knew that this tunnel existed, or shall we do better to attempt to descend it?"

"It is one question, among several," my companion answered, "but it is hard to answer. We have some facts now of which we were ignorant when we decided two nights ago. If we exchange our thoughts at once, we shall make confusion only. Let us think separately till we have each resolved what is best, and have made our reasons clear to ourselves. Then, should we differ, and either prove unable to convince the other, I will give way very willingly."

I assented to this, knowing it to be unlikely that such a difference would arise or continue, and we remained silent for a considerable time, for my own thoughts were chaotic, and I was anxious not to interrupt the exhaustive logic of the mind beside me.

My inclination was to explore the cavity to which we had now come, but when I attempted to formulate arguments in support of this preference, I knew that I could not do so conclusively. I was in a state of nervous exhaustion, and my courage sank at the thought of struggling outward through the belt of the resisting will, only to front the perils of the pathless hills, and the jaws of the waiting Frog-mouths. Though to descend to the Dwellers might mean destruction, I was in no mood to defer it, but rather to cast myself upon their mercy, with a feeling of indifference as to what the end might be. So that when my comrade indicated her willingness to converse again, I was quick to ask her opinion first, to which she assented with her usual equanimity.

"IT is evident," she began, "that though we know more than we did, we know so little that all decision must be guessing, and each new fact, as we gain it, can only demonstrate how foolish may have been the choice we made before we perceived it. Yet, when the roads branch, a choice must be made.

"The Dwellers may have information by which they know of our movements, or they may be searching for us, in ignorance of where we are; or they may be entirely unaware or indifferent.

"In the first case, it seems clear that should we return we are adding useless dangers to a sufficient

peril, for we must face them, first or last, and we can gain nothing by wandering upon the surface before we do so; in the second, we may be more likely to avoid them if we descend here, by an entrance which appears unwatched, and where they do not know us to be, than if we return to those with which they already know us to be familiar; in the third case, it may still be to our advantage to descend at once, rather than to wander farther upon the unfriendly surface of an unfamiliar world. I can see that there may be facts which would make folly of these conclusions. We are certainly distant from where my Leader's body was left to their mercy. We have no reason to suppose, if it had been preserved at all, that it has been conveyed below the surface in this direction. We have no reason to suppose that we shall be able to penetrate under the surface toward the point from which our search should commence more easily than we can do above it. We have no certainty that there is any connection whatever between this passage and those of which we knew previously. Should we descend, and escape capture or destruction, it may still be that a later day will see us emerge with time lost, to no end but the experience of an abortive adventure. This is the more likely because there is no evidence of traffic to or from the entrance, but the whole aspect is of the reservation of a peculiar and sacred place. I cannot tell which may be best, but my inclination is to go down."

I ANSWERED, "So is mine; and I can add to your reasons two at least which you have not mentioned. The one is that while within the tunnel you have lost the disability of the blindness which had hindered us in the surrounding area; the other, which is more serious (because I suppose that we could quickly reach the woods where you would presumably see as before) is that, after this delay, it is doubtful whether we could cross the hills before the night falls, and now that my last remnants of clothing have left me, my body is ill-adapted to meet either storm or frost, and I have less fear of the more even temperature of the subterranean places.

"It is true that this passage is not like the one which I first penetrated. Its slope is less. Its current of upward air is less evident. Its floor is less easy to tread. Its roof does not give the same measure of light. It may not be frequently used, and it may lack the stores of food and water on which I subsisted. But beyond this, all is conjecture. It is a choice of risks, and we agree as to the one to be chosen."

So we rose, and went down together.

Chapter Six

THE DOWNWARD PATH

I HAVE often speculated as to what might have happened had we decided differently, and had I survived the dangers of the surface world, and attempted the penetration of one of the seaward tunnels. Knowing what I do now, I suppose that it must have ended fatally for myself, if not for my companion also. But so much is still mystery, so much conjecture, that even that may not be certainly true.

As it was, we went on for some time in an eventless silence, the dark green shadowy smoothness of the surface on which we trod sloping gently downward, the glassy arch above us becoming gloomier

as we left the daylight. The idea oppressed me that we were actually traversing a wave's interior cavity. I think that I had been mentally exhausted by the prolonged effort of conveying the scene through which we had passed to my companion's mind.

Once or twice I tried to establish connection with her, but her thoughts were closed against me, and I gained no more than a knowledge that she was abstracted and troubled, and indisposed for conversing. Then we came to a place where we must needs pause and consult, for the straight path ceased. The slope ceased. We stood on a level path that curved forward, right and left, with a blank wall before us. Either side we might turn, and the choice could scarcely be made in silence.

I questioned my companion with thought and eyes. It was too dark for me to see hers, but mine may have been visible to her better sight. She answered readily.

"Yes, we must choose; but I have been concerned with a greater urgency. As we entered the tunnel my mind inquired for my own people, with whom I had been disconnected since the encounter with the Dwellers which we witnessed together, and though I have learnt nothing of their welfare I found that an urgent message is being sent out to me continually—*Return at once. Further concealment useless. The animal must go to the Dwellers, who have already dealt suitably with those he seeks. Do not reply.*

"THIS is the message, about which I am troubled. I cannot quickly tell what is right to do. I conclude that no reply is desired because there is either fear or certainty that it would be intercepted, and understood by the Dwellers, and might do harm in ways which I cannot know, and might not therefore avoid. It may be from the same cause that the message contains no mention of the body of my Leader, though that is the object for which I am here. It may be that this trouble is over; even that it is returned already. Yet the objection to any reply being sent indicates less than complete harmony, and there may be actual hostility between the Dwellers and ourselves.

"From these two questions follow.

"If there be dissension between the Dwellers and ourselves, and concealment be useless, how can I hope to return openly and in safety? Possibly they may have agreed that I shall not be hindered, if you remain, though there are some improbabilities in this supposition. So far, I have thought of no other.

"The second question, which is greatly the more important, is this. Am I right to leave you? Never, from the remotest memory, have I known such a doubt to rise, nor can I tell how to resolve it. Always we

have acted together. Our Leaders have thought for all, and our will has been single."

The news which she gave had disconcerted me sufficiently for my thoughts to be both confused and depressed at the first hearing, and I cannot say to what protest or reproach they might otherwise have led me, but to this appeal there could be only one answer possible.

"If you feel under the obligation of the promise that we should explore the tunnels of the Dwellers together, there is no need for concern on that point, for I release you from it. Even if I should not, I think that your first duty must be to your own kind, and that the news which your message gives has altered the whole position so radically that no arrangement could be binding which was made in ignorance of it."

SHE answered, "You confuse me with vague thoughts. Let us be silent," and for some minutes she closed her mind.

Then she continued, "Your thought is generous, and I should be unfair not to recognize it, but it is born of conditions which are as alien from ourselves as are the ways of the Frog-mouths. If I be under obligation to you to keep an undertaking which may have already altered your course, and changed the experiences which you must now encounter, how can it affect what is right for me to do, that you should accept my desertion without protest? When you suppose that you can release me in such a way, you assume a position of Deity—and of a Deity who could alter the essentials of what is right and wrong. It is not your willingness that I should go which concerns me—it is the verdict of my own mind."

I answered, "I have no doubt that you are right, and that you have rebuked me justly. Yet, no less, I should like to feel that you have decided with a mind untroubled by any thought of consequence to myself; for the event, whether you stay or go, is beyond forecasting. Either way may be the more dangerous for me. It is beyond knowing. But for yourself, it seems evident that should you stay you will incur a needless risk of the anger of the Dwellers, and must be troubled by the additional fear that you will have disobeyed your Leaders, and may have to face the consequences of their anger, should you escape the perils of your present enterprise. It seems to me that your position would then be worse even than my own, and I cannot willingly agree that you should incur such dangers to aid me."

"You think," she answered, "after your own kind, and suppose a fear which I could not feel, and a contingency which will not occur. If it be evil that there should be discord of thought between me and my people, is it reasonable that

either side should desire to continue and perhaps increase it, in a vain quarrel concerning what will have happened?

"Should I finally return, I shall give my reasons, and, should they be found insufficient or otherwise, the event must be a source of wisdom for all of us. But that must wait its time. In which direction shall we go?"

WE LOOKED to right and left, along corridors that curved forward on either hand, and which were more nearly of the kind that I had first explored than was the tunnel behind us, excepting that they were level-floored, and were not lighted in the same way.

The walls were vertical: the ceiling flat: the flooring was of the material that looked like polished steel, and was soft to the feet, with which I was already familiar. But in place of the dove-grey walls, and the faint opalescence of the roof of my first experience, there was an intermittent darkness, broken by moving fires that glowed, as it seemed, deep within the substance of the walls, and changed, and faded, and revived elsewhere.

It shows how dulled we had become to unfamiliar wonder, or how concentrated our minds had been upon the new problem which had disturbed us, that we had not observed these shifting lights when first our eyes must have beheld them.

Now, as we gazed, the left-hand side of the leftward passage glowed with a sudden redness not twenty yards away. The light spread, and spread, along the glassy surface of the wall, until it had almost reached us. It rose up till it neared the gloom of the distant roof, of which the darkness was not pierced but was changed to a dusky red. The steel-gray floor was stained also with a faint reflected redness. The glowing color showed the lofty passage before us till it curved out of view.

"Come," she said, "while the light lasts," and I knew that, with the decision made, her mind had recovered all its buoyant serenity.

As we left the light, it was already fading, but others showed ahead, and we went on in an ever-changing darkness, seldom far from some luminosity which was sufficient to guide us on a plain and unimpeded way.

The colors in the walls were various, not only in their kind, or in their intensity, area, or duration, but they had an appearance of being of varying distance from us, so that we would look at the dark wall, and see the transient motion of some glowing splendor, as it seemed, a mile within it, and then an interval of darkness and then a burst of light and color, like an open rose, that seemed to be scarcely covered by the surface of the wall that held it.

So we went on until, in no great

space of time, we came to an opening on the left hand, wide and high as the passage in which we were, and on the same level, but in an absolute blackness.

WE WERE of one mind to explore it, for the thought had come to both of us that if we continued to traverse that in which we were, we must return to the point from which we started, should the curve continue. My companion, whose judgment was far more accurate than my own on such points, was definite that we had completed a quarter of the full circle when this side-corridor was reached. So we decided; not doubting that it would be lighted in the same manner, and foreseeing no obstacle. I have little doubt, from our later experiences, that we were right on the first point, as we were certainly wrong on the second, for we found at the first step that we were confronted by the same withstanding force that had obstructed our passage of the sleeping wood, but more instant and urgent in its application, so that we did not attempt to hold our ground, but fell back at the same impulse to consult whether we should again adventure against it.

Recalling our previous decision, and our successful effort, I was disposed to accept the challenge it gave us, but my companion differed. She pointed out that it had then resisted the straightforward path which we had resolved to take, but that now we should be turning aside to face a needless difficulty, without knowing that the passage we left might not be in every way the more direct to our purpose.

So we went on, and twice again, at similar intervals, did we come to such a passage, and each time we attempted it for a few paces, and recoiled from the resistance of the will that met us.

But the third time we did not accept defeat as we had done previously. We considered that these passages had appeared at similar intervals, and that it was probable that this was the last we should meet, the fourth quarter of the curving path returning us to the point from which we had started. Faced by this probability, we rested awhile, and then, hand in hand, that my companion's vitality might give me the physical strength I needed, so that my will should be free for the nervous conflict before us, we went resolutely into the dark mouth of the cavity.

IN THE course of a few steps, taken with difficulty, as though our feet dragged in a heavy sand, and our limbs and bodies were pressed against a trammelling and resisting garment, we found that we were in an absolute blackness, so that we could not see our steps, and it is doubtful, indeed, whether we should not have retired at once from so menacing a prospect, had not my inferior power of progres-

sion caused us to bend our course somewhat to the right, on which side I was, and as we drew nearer to the wall we discovered that it was of a quality which I may best describe as having an interior luminosity. It gave no light to the passage at all, but standing closely to it we could look into it, as into a glass, yet seeing no reflection of ourselves, but a vision that held us absorbed and silent. At first we saw a dark pool, or it might be the shadowed space of a river, but it showed no current, nor any motion of wind. Strange, fronded trees grew beside it. At some distance, there was a touch of moonlight on the water, but it did not waver. We watched for some time, as though expecting something to happen, and yet I thought it to be nothing more than a picture of some primeval creation. Then it seemed that the dark surface of the water broke, and a long snout, as of an alligator, moved into the lighted space, and sank again very quietly. Nothing else. We watched a long time further, but nothing changed, unless, perhaps, the light on the water was slightly fainter. "Is it real?" I wondered. "No, surely," she thought, "I suppose it to be a picture of things long past. I do not think it to be of the earth of this time. Shall we look at the other wall?"

I agreed, though I was reluctant to withdraw my gaze from that primeval night, where I might see I knew not what of mystery or of wonder if I should wait till its morning came. The pressure was more tolerable while we made no effort to move directly forward, and we crossed the interval of blackness quite easily, to find, as my companion had thought, that the opposite wall held a corresponding wonder.

But it was not of any strange or terrible or momentous scene.

There was a faint light, as of the late evening, or the very early dawn of a winter day, and snow was falling thickly. Bare trees showed dimly, and one ivied trunk was close, as though we might have reached to touch it, and on the dark berries a pair of hawfinches were feeding. They were so real and close that it seemed strange that no sound came as they changed footing with a flutter of wings, or pulled the sprays apart.

THAT was all. It might have been a scene from a winter of my own day, or of millenniums before or after.

And while we gazed, we became aware that something with a heavy tread had entered the passage. We thought it (and rightly) to be one of the Dwellers. The steps passed us, and went forward. We were of one mind to follow.

Returning to the centre of the tunnel, we were again in darkness, but the footsteps led us, and we found that the resistance against which we had fought had ceased to

trouble us while we followed the unseen feet. Realizing this, we increased our pace to a run, lest the dividing space should widen, so that we were but ten or fifteen yards behind—our feet making no sounds on the soft flooring—when our unseen guide turned into a chamber on the right-hand side of the passage.

Chapter Seven

THE LIVING BOOK

WE STOOD at the entrance of a room of (to us) enormous proportions. It was filled with an equally-diffused light, of which I saw no origin.

Neither, when I considered it later, could I observe any appliance for the regulation of temperature or ventilation. Yet the warmth was such that I did not suffer from my lack of clothing; the air was fresh and exhilarating. The arched entrance to the room had no door, but the light stayed at the threshold. Standing on the outer side of the entrance, we supposed ourselves to be unobserved in the darkness.

The Dweller that we had fol-

lowed was a woman, like the one we had last seen, but her coloring was different. The hair on her head was short, curling, and glossy black. It extended down the spine in the same way. The body-color varied from a dark bluish-black to the softest, palest grays. The effect was beautiful beyond describing.

Her form was as straight and graceful as had been that of the other, nor did it give an impression of great size in a room which was proportioned to it. It was not she that was large, but we that were small. Her body was slim and perfect in its proportions, and her face was flawless, yet where the other had given an impression of youth, there was here an atmosphere of age incalculable. I cannot say from what it came, unless from one thing only. Her eyes were intolerably tired.

AS SHE entered the room she had an object about the size of a football perched on her left shoulder. There was a table in the center, of a transparent blue substance. It had three legs which joined in a twisted knot, and then spread out. I noticed that these legs moved so that the table adjusted itself to her as she approached it, but whether this movement was sentient or mechanical I could not tell. She extended her left arm to the surface of the table, and the object on her shoulder rolled slowly down.

It was of the color of a boiled lobster, with many bluish-white appendages hanging from its surface. They were about an inch in length, and of the shape of a dachshund's ear. As it rolled forward they spread out like hands, to balance and control its motion, and when it rested those that were close to the ground would support it steadily.

It was evidently alive, but it had no other features that I could observe, and it appeared equally comfortable whatever part of its surface was uppermost.

The table was relatively higher than those to which we are accustomed, and there was no chair or other seat in the room.

The Dweller remained standing, as though her attention were fixed upon the red globule before her. I turned to my companion to convey my wonder, but she gave me a quick thought that she was trying to follow what was happening, and did not wish for distraction, so I looked quietly round the room while I waited.

The wall on the side on which we stood, and those to right and left, were blank of all but color, which was blue, of a very delicately-beautiful tint, which I had not seen previously, evidently designed to harmonize with the coloring of its occupant.

The farther wall was of the same nature as those we had passed in the passage, having a

living picture within it—if living it could be called, which was an epitome of desolation.

It showed far more plainly, or at least to a far greater distance, than did those into which we had looked before. It was a scene of a frozen river, which itself must have been half-a-mile in width, and of an endless solitary frozen plain beyond it. The sky was frosty blue and cloudless.

There were no trees—nothing but the silent frozen river, and the silent frozen snow.

I had a perception that it had lain thus for many centuries, lifeless, windless, and unchanging, and that it was in some inexplicable way akin to the one who appeared to have selected it to companion her, and that within it lay the explanation of the weariness in her eyes.

But its desolation was less than hers, for it must have ended at some time in the earth's history. Though it might have endured for millenniums, yet the time had come when the earth again swung sunward, and the warmth found it. But for the weariness from which she suffered there was no hope at all.

Following this impression, it occurred to me as a natural thing that, if reflections of the earth's changing past were used as mural decorations, such scenes and periods would be preferred as would show little or very gradual differences, or their suitability might be lost.

THE articles in the room were few. There was a wide shelf at the center of the left-hand wall, on which were stacked a number of flat boards which were probably pictures, or material for them, for, to the right of the table, there was an easel, such as would have looked natural enough, apart from its size, in a studio of our own day, with a similar board upon it, on which a picture of the frozen desolation was half completed.

There were various smaller articles ranged beneath the shelf, of which I could not understand the nature or utility.

I returned my attention to my companion, to find her ready for conversing. She said, "I cannot learn much, as the thoughts which are passing are not meant for us, but it seems that there is something here similar to your own device, of which you have told me. I know that you have a method of recording ideas and facts by means of marks on retentive substances, so that the knowledge of them may remain, though the brain in which they originated be ended, and that, by this means, you have partly overcome one of the defects of your individual mortality. It seems to me that this method must be subject to great disadvantages, as it must be even easier for such as you are to make marks which will be

false, or the record of foolish imagination, than to be accurate in fact, and wise in deduction; and, as you have no authority to distinguish between them, your children must often be induced to foolishness, or misled to disaster. Possibly the confusion may be so great that they are distracted from any continuing path, and the result is the inconsequent and abortive activities of mind and body to which you are so largely accustomed.

"However that may be, it appears that the Dwellers have devised a somewhat similar method of recording the facts they accumulate, or the theories which they formulate, such as is more suited to their greater longevity, and their superior intelligence.

"This which we see is one of their books—a living creature of a kind, designed to store the thoughts that are given to it, and to convey them at later periods to any inquiring mind. She whom we now see is both the custodian and the compiler of these volumes, and I gather that she is now placing on record the events in which we have so lately participated."

WHILE I received this explanation, the Dweller had crossed the room, and picked up a metal article of a brass color, and of the shape of a figure eight, which she laid flatly on the ground, and within one of the loops of which she placed the living ball, with which she now apparently finished, and then stood for some time gazing at the half-painted picture, and at the scene from which it was taken. Her method of painting was different from our own in this particular, that one part of the picture was entirely finished, but ended abruptly at a blank which was not touched at all.

After a time, she resumed her work, and the reason of this became evident. She painted with a long pencil terminating in a small flat pad, of a surface of two or three square inches, and this she dipped into saucers of various semi-liquid colors which were arranged upon a wide ledge of the easel below the picture. There could only have been black and white and shadows of blue and gray that were needed, but the pad was dipped many times, and touched lightly with a finely pointed instrument in her left hand, till at last she was satisfied, and it was pressed upon the surface of the picture, to which it added a further rectangle of finished work. The picture was then touched slightly with another pad, apparently to blend the added portion perfectly with the earlier work, and the same process was resumed.

It was slow to watch, but my companion was of an unhurried mind, and it is my own disposition to go cautiously when in doubt. I was neither willing to leave this scene for a further risk of the dark

passage, nor to face a crisis by revealing ourselves in the room, and so we sat and watched in the outer darkness. It was not a very long vigil, for the artist appeared to weary, laid down her tools, hesitated, walked toward the scene which she had been painting, stood gazing at it for some time in silence, and then lay down beneath it, where it appeared that the floor rose in a smooth curve, a few feet above the surrounding level.

This surface gave way gently to the impression of her body, which sank down partly within it. She lay face forward, her head turned from us, her arms extended straightly above her head. Lying so, she stretched for half the length of the room. There was no sound of breathing, and we could not tell whether she slept, but after watching for some time longer we were of one mind to adventure a further investigation.

Very quietly we entered the room together.

Chapter Eight

THE TREATY

IT WAS with a common impulse of curiosity that we first went towards the living book which was resting motionless within the metal circle. It had no distinguishable features, and I cannot tell how it became aware of our existence, but it was its function to respond to the approach of any inquiring mind. It rebuffed any attempt to explain our own presence, or what we were, being evidently unable, or forbidden, to accept information except from the official librarian, but as we were more anxious to obtain information than to impart it, we had no objection to this, and, as we found it a cause of confu-

sion to question it together, my companion generously gave the preference to my own curiosities, and composed her mind to receive the replies which it should give me.

WE learnt that it was the last volume of the official History of the Dwellers, its record extending back for about two hundred years, and it would have been quite willing to begin at chapter one of that period, and go on for a week, had we been willing for it to do so. When it understood that it was required to select specific information in response to my questions, it assented, rather sulkily, though I soon realized that its function was limited to supplying the actual information which it possessed. It was unable to give any explanation or comment beyond anything which it had received with the facts. To any question which went outside its period, or beyond its province, it returned no answer. Even of the way to the library from which it had come it had no knowledge, though it wished to be returned to its accustomed shelf. It knew, however, that it must not venture to cross the metal circle which now confined it, under penalty of a swift destruction.

My companion perceived the reason for this, as she was aware, without touching it, that the metal was heavily charged with some petrifying force having the vigor of electricity, and of a current sufficient to overcome a much larger creature than that which it now imprisoned.

"Are you impervious to electricity?" I was led to ask, as I perceived her indifference to this new danger.

"No," she replied, "of course not. How could we live without it? But we can naturally control the quantity which we receive. Otherwise our bodies would be continually exposed to the risk of a sudden destruction. Are you so liable?"

I said that I was certainly not immune from such danger, and it added a new peril to our investigations if the Dwellers were accustomed to use it or other forces of unknown potentialities, in such a manner. She agreed, but assured me that she could give warning very easily, now that she knew of this additional infirmity of my body, as she could always tell the quantity and direction of any electric force which might be in her neighborhood.

I was puzzled to think that the Dwellers should expose so valuable a record to the risk of destruction as a penalty for its own disobedience, and this made me somewhat sceptical of the accuracy of my companion's explanation, but I learnt afterwards that the effect would merely have been that a new volume would have been commenced. These creatures are only kept alive until they have received

as much information as they are capable of retaining, and are then slaughtered. The information which they contain being permanently available, as is that of a gramophone record, and the minds that hold it being more surely and easily stored when they are dead, than in a living state.

HAVING realized the character and limitations of the record at our disposal, I asked first concerning the safety of the two friends whom I had come to seek. I had to repeat the question in many forms before obtaining any response, but I finally obtained this information, which was obviously the only record which had been made, and the extent of the help which was here available.

Two Primitives of the False-Skin Age were captured by the 42nd Coast Patrol. One was of a venomous kind. They were received by the Bureau of Prehistoric Zoology. The body of one was found to be suffering from microbic disease beyond sterilization, and was scrapped by the Vivisection Department. The other was transferred to the Experimental Section, after the usual method.

That was all. The fate of one of those who had preceded me was sufficiently indicated, and that of the other was, at the best, enigmatic; but I could learn no more. Even of the place or nature of the Bureau it mentioned the living book was entirely ignorant.

Little as it was, it was sufficient to suggest that I should be very foolish to place myself in the hands of the Dwellers, unless I were compelled to do so. I realized, as I had not done previously, that my position was that to which, in my own time, the human race had reduced all the other living creatures on the earth's surface, and that the Dwellers, however justly they might act to each other, would probably consider it an absolute duty to put me to death or torture if they could gain any knowledge, obtain any advantage to themselves, or even avert some trivial inconvenience, by so doing, as many men, and nearly all women, would subject a mouse to a violent or lingering death for no greater reason than that it had annoyed them by a sound in the night.

HAVING realized that I could obtain no further information on the subject of my own search, I remembered—none too soon—that my companion must be equally urgent to learn of the one for whom she was seeking, and of the events which had occasioned the recall which had reached her, and I inquired accordingly, and received this answer:

ARTICLE 5. *In consideration of the foregoing, the body of the*

Amphibian will be delivered at the Fishgates, at once, and uninjured. The one who is seeking it will be allowed, and, if needful, assisted to return in safety, provided that such return be made before the third sunset, and that she shall not have entered the Sacred Places. The Primitive shall remain. He shall be treated with such kindness as circumstances admit, and, if healthy and quiet, shall be transferred to an appropriate Reservation. But if he be in any way diseased he may be dealt with according to the nature of his infirmity, and as the protection of the community may require. Otherwise, unless he be violent or intractable, he shall not be slaughtered, either for food or for any other purpose, except in the ordinary course, and at such period as is usual.

Certainly there was information here, and warning, and some mystery also. Our thought was single that this must be the purport of an agreement that must have been made between the Amphibians and the Dwellers since the commencement of our expedition, and we were alike in desiring to learn the other clauses of the treaty, before we considered our course of action.

These were very promptly given, for I believe that these living books were so constituted that they derived a positive physical pleasure from such thought-transference as would convey their contents to other minds, such as is commonly experienced in the exercise of the ordinary functions of the human body.

The treaty (omitting the fifth clause already given) was this:

ARTICLE 1. *The Leaders of the Amphibians pledge themselves and their nation, without reservation or exception, that they will not henceforward, or any of them, invade the continent of the Dwellers, either above, at, or under the sea-level, unless or except as may be mutually agreed hereafter.*

ARTICLE 2. *The Leaders of the Amphibians shall appoint two of their number, and the Dwellers shall appoint two of their number, to confer and agree upon the times at and the conditions if any on which the Amphibians or any of them may enter or remain upon the surface of the territory of the Dwellers, or any part thereof.*

ARTICLE 3. *The Amphibians pledge themselves that they will not give any aid, assistance, or information, active or passive, to the Antipodeans, or hold any communications with them, except, if at all, at the desire of the Dwellers, and to obtain information on their behalf.*

ARTICLE 4. *The Amphibians will forthwith institute and maintain a complete service of observation upon the coast of the Antipodeans, and upon all aerial movements above or from their coasts, with*

such relays of communication as shall convey all such information to the Dwellers at the least possible intervals of time after the observation of such movements.

ARTICLE 5. (Already given).

ARTICLE 6. *Should the Amphibian who is now landed have invaded, or invade, the Sacred Places, or should she remain hidden in the land until after the time of the third sunset, or should she neglect or refuse to return by or before the time stated, then the Dwellers shall be free to deal with her as may appear just to them, or as their safety or interests may require, and the Amphibians shall none the less carry out the first four Articles of this treaty, as though she should have returned safely.*

ARTICLE 7. *In the event of the successful resuscitation of the body of the Amphibian Leader and of her assent to this clause, and provided that the Amphibian now on the territory of the Dwellers shall have returned in safety whether within the period stated in Article 5, or later by the clemency of the Dwellers, then, and in these events, the Leaders of the Amphibians severally and on behalf of their nation and of every member thereof, do pledge themselves actively to assist the Dwellers against the Antipodeans, in the hostilities now impending, to the full extent of their national and individual capacities, according to their natures, and by such means as they are spiritually and physically qualified to do.*

ARTICLE 8. *The Amphibians are entitled to communicate with the member of their nation who is now on the territory of the Dwellers for the purpose of recalling her, but not otherwise, nor shall they invite or receive any communication from her while she remain upon any part of that territory or within it, nor with the Primitive who was her companion.*

ARTICLE 9. *This treaty is made in honor, verity, and goodwill, without guile and without duress, each nation contracting freely, and on its own territory, that which is past being forgotten as though it had not been; by the six acting Leaders of the Amphibians, and, on behalf of the Dwellers, by the High Council of Five, and by the device of the Aged Ones, all equally, severally, and unanimously assenting thereto, in the Audience of Space, and in the Light of the Perpetual Stars.*

HAD I been alone I might have delighted the source of this information by requiring its repetition several times, for it contained much which required exactness of memory for its consideration, and it suffered from the defect of all treaties since the world began, that the effort to avoid possibilities of ambiguity or evasion results in an added obscurity, so that they are much more vulnerable to miscon-

struction, as they are more difficult to readily comprehend, than are simpler and more straightforward documents. But my companion intimated at once that she could recall it as required, and she proposed that we should retire into the comparative security of the darkness while we considered it together.

This we did, and I opened my mind to her at once in this manner, "There is much in what we have heard which must be clearer to you than it is to me, but it is evident that some larger issue of impending warfare has assisted your nation to adjust their differences with the Dwellers, and that you have no further need for concealment, or cause to continue our enterprise. On the contrary, your safety lies in a prompt and open return to your own people.

"But my position is different. Your people have abandoned me to the Dwellers, and it appears that, if I fall into their hands, I shall lose my liberty at the least, and be exposed to death, or even torture, or the foulest outrage, as caprice, or self-interest, or curiosity may suggest.

"For though you appear to regard the Dwellers as of superior mentality to myself, they do not demonstrate this by brutalities, such as it appears may have been fatal to my friends already, and which can only regard a being whom they know to have reached them from an earlier age, as something to be killed and eaten. In some parts of my own world there are savages so degraded in type that they will eat the decrepit members of their own race, or strangers who wander into their territory, but they are regarded as the lowest specimens of their kind.

"In the experience of my own time it is not usual to find exceptional brutality such as this to be allied with any high level of intelligence, and it occurs to my mind that the Dwellers have not shown any conspicuous ability in discovering our movements, and that when I was actually captured by one of them, I escaped very easily.

"So far am I from deciding to place myself in their power that I am resolved to outwit them. I suppose from what we have heard that one of my friends has already become a victim of their cruelty. The other I am resolved to rescue, if he be still living. After that, I hope to find some means of concealment and sustenance on the surface, to which I shall return, until the time come when I shall be able to rejoin the civilization that you deride, but which offers a peace and security which I am never likely to find among the barbarous cruelties which you esteem so lightly."

MY COMPANION closed her mind from me when I had finished, but only for a short time, and then answered quietly. "I think

I understand something of the feeling from which your thoughts had their origin, and at the injustice to myself and to my nation which you have implied I am not angered at all, but I think that our minds have never been so far apart since first I met you.

"There was not a single thought which you showed me which was not either false or foolish, and it is easy to believe that you come of a species which devour each other, though there are few created thing so base as to do this, in all the seas that I have known until I came in contact with you."

I WAS startled by the unexpectedness of this rebuke, the justice of which I did not realize, but my mind was cooled by contact with one which declined to rise to its temperature, and I replied in a somewhat different mood, "I should be sorry to be unfair to your nation, and especially to yourself, from whom I have had nothing but a loyal comradeship which I have done little to merit. I know that my mind was troubled and indignant, though it still seems to me that I had cause for such feelings. But if you think differently, can you not show me in what I have deserved your censure?"

"Yes," she replied, "I think I can do that very easily, but it is the more interesting to me to observe how entirely the use of your reason ceases when you are moved by anger or fear, or, perhaps, by other feelings, for I can see that the thought that we were about to part was among the disturbances that suspended your capacity to think to any useful purpose.

"First, it is by no means clear that I can return in safety, or at all. How do you know that I have not invaded the Sacred Places, or even that we are not now within them? I think we may be.

"Second, there would, in any case, be no occasion for us to part immediately, should we remain undiscovered. The third sunset is still distant.

"Third, my people have done nothing to cause you to fall into the hands of the Dwellers, which you are still free to avoid if you are able. They have been careful to make a treaty which gives you a measure of protection which you could not otherwise have secured should you be captured. We have explained already that you could not come with us, being physically unfit to endure existence in the only territory we control, or in the waters to which we are native, were we willing to have you, and were we able to remove you from the place that you have chosen to enter.

"Fourth, you are unjust to the Dwellers, and forgetful of things which you have told me of your own kind.

"You have told me that your own race will destroy other creatures without shame, not only for

their own food, or safety (in which you would not yourself say that they are wrong), but merely for the pleasure which they derive from inflicting misery upon those who have done them no injury, or for the gratification of curiosity, or in the hope of some material advantage resulting to themselves or their fellows.

"More than this, with an unnatural baseness, they will even accept service from, or make such professions of friendship as will gain the confidence of, other creatures, which they will not then hesitate to betray and murder, as caprice or self-interest may incline them. You have told me that you habitually destroy creatures whose affection and loyalty you have gained, when they become old and infirm, or are injured by accident, readily persuading yourselves that you do these things out of kindness, although you do not desire that you should be dealt with in a similar manner when your own body shall show evidence that its vigor is decreasing.

"YOU have shown you justify these things in your own minds by arguing that you are of such superior nature that the welfare, or existence, of all other creatures is of comparative triviality.

"But even though such conduct could be condoned by a demonstration of superiority, or would be consistent therewith, it is difficult to understand by what arguments this asserted superiority could be maintained.

"Is it by your power to cause the deaths of others? Then a disease-germ (as you have yourself admitted) may be greater than you.

"Is it by conduct? But you have shown me that you work violence, fraud, and cruelty among yourselves, and against the creatures around you.

"Is it by wisdom? Have you discovered a way of life which is more safe, more leisured, more healthy, more in harmony with your surrounding conditions, than that of the creatures which you despise and destroy? Are their conditions more abject than are those of the disordered and disastrous lives of which you have told me, where you crowd together in disease and dirt, inexplicably separated from the land which supplies you with the food which your bodies need so continually?

"As are the vermin which you trap and kill without mercy, so, and less than so, and rightly less than so, must you be to the Dwellers.

"You are not of their world. You came unasked. You may bring strange disease. You may produce discord in a thousand ways. Your mind is indignant and hostile, merely at the assurance that they will deal with you in patient justice, after inquiry has been held—or, it may be, at the worst, with that expediency which is the basis

of the civilization from which you come."

I ANSWERED quickly, for my mind responded to hers with more thoughts than I could easily control for transference, "I see that you have judged more reasonably than I was able to do. My mind was moved by fear, under which influence its reactions are instinctive rather than rational. There is much in your thoughts which is true, as it reflects upon my own kind, and there is much also that might be urged in defence or extenuation of conduct which appears to you so monstrous. But there are questions of practical urgency also which must be faced, and the occasion is scarcely one for explanation or argument concerning abstract or distant things.

"Yet one thing I should like to show you. You may reflect adversely upon our treatment of living creatures of other kinds than our own, and your thought may not be far from mine, but were you one of ourselves, you would be faced by issues which are not simple to decide, and by conditions which are not easy to alter.

"It is true, for the most part, of the domestic animals that we eat, that we work for them all their lives in a willing servitude, which is the price we pay for the right to kill them at last. We build their houses; we prepare their food; we heal their diseases; we wait upon them in the most menial ways. They are fed with regularity, and without their own exertion; they are protected from inclement weather. We may even risk our own lives to guard them from the murderous attacks of other beasts of prey. Finally, they probably die with less pain, and with far less of fear and foreboding, than will be the lot of those who minister to, and then destroy them.

"It is true that we do these things for our own ends, and they owe us no gratitude, but it is also true that, apart from these things, they would not exist at all, nor is it true that we are regardless of their well-being nor indifferent to their suffering. Some may be, but many are not.

"I am not sure but that the heavier indictment against us may be, not that we give them death at last, which comes to all, but that we deny them life while living. It is an inevitable result of their protected lives, that they have degenerated in intelligence and character, and compare very poorly with those of their kind that have retained their freedom in remoter places.

"Further, it appears evident that, with rare and doubtful exceptions, they have no understanding or premonition of death, and are in this respect happier than ourselves.

"You have asked why we should consider that we are greater than the other creatures around us. I agree that a superior capacity for

successful violence is a poor argument in support of such a claim, nor should I urge it. Nor should I urge that our conduct of life is superior, for there is a barrier dividing their mentalities from ours that no man has been able to cross, and I should confuse assumption with evidence: nor can I, for the same reason, and for others also, claim that we are of greater wisdom than they. Greater knowledge we may have, but it is of the race rather than the individual, and it would be a poor ground for such a claim, at the best.

"If I should seek to support such a plea, I would rather urge the difficulty of the conditions against which we contend, than the extent to which we triumph.

"Our ancestors broke from their environment, and may have shown a doubtful wisdom in so doing. But having so broken, we are confronted with difficulties from which the rest of the creation is free. If our conduct be worse, our circumstances are more treacherous.

"BUT there is another difference. Most creatures, though we may not prematurely destroy them, are even shorter-lived than we. They lack the assistance of our inventions for recording knowledge, and, to some extent, handing it down to our children. So far as we can judge, they have no substitute for these, and their individual ignorance of our purpose to destroy them, and of the methods we use, is a natural consequence.

"I am not sure that this thought does not bring us nearer to understanding the difference between my kind and other animals than would any of the three tests you proposed. All animals have an inherited fear of pain or damage to their bodies, and this leads them to such actions or reactions as will conserve their lives, but it is a curious thought that, since the hidden beginning of created things, no one can have had any inherited experience of death, of which we know by observation only. Our parents were alive at our conceptions and births, as were all their ancestors before them, and our direct inherited experience could be no different were they all alive and immortal. But the accumulated observations and records of the race familiarize us with the nature of death—at least in its physical consequences—and teach us its inevitability, from our earliest years. *In his eyes foreknowledge of death,* that is the burden, and perhaps the glory, of our kind; and that which may divide us furthest from those who have been content to obey the laws of their creation. It is a curious fact that such animals as we may allow to associate with us in any intimacy must share to some extent this difference, be it height or depth, which divides us from the rest of our creation. A lion cannot sin: but a dog can.

"—But perhaps I weary you with

details which are beyond your interest?"

SHE answered, "No, for I would gladly know more of these things, were there time for the learning, though we must leave them now. For it seems that the more our thoughts exchange, the more nearly do our minds approach to a common point. It may be that we both see truly, though the same things may appear different. Looking from a distant point, I see the outlines of your existence as you cannot easily do. Knowing it more closely, you are aware of dangers and fertilities which I overlook, seeing only the contours of the mountain peaks, and of the depths which divide them.

"But there is one thought in which you may take some comfort. You have told me that your kind, or some of them, will eat their fellow-men when occasion offers. The Dwellers are, at the worst, so entirely incapable of such conduct, that you may reasonably hope that there will be a similar measure of difference between your own treatment of your domestic animals, and that which you will receive from them, should you be captured or surrender to them."

I replied, "I should be glad to think so; but the fact is that the practice I mentioned is almost entirely confined to men with darker skins than mine. I have, as you observe, a light skin, tinged with pink. All men whose skins are of this kind believe it to be an evidence of every kind of superiority —and how the darker cannibals may treat their domestic animals it is somewhat unfortunate that I do not know."

Her mind replied with a sudden ripple of merriment. "I suppose you jest. But let us turn from these things, and consider what next we shall do, and how quickly. For time is short before I must take decision as to whether I shall return within the limit fixed. Yet much may be done, if we are fortunate, in the space remaining; and, as you said in your anger, the Dwellers are not quick to discover us. Yet I think you err when you make light of our peril. Are there no vermin in your own buildings, which you might disregard for more urgent matters, but which you would destroy very easily at the allotted time, or should occasion arise to do so?"

I said, "Yes, there are; yet some of them have found craft by which they continue, and so must we also. But, first, cannot we learn something more from this book which we have borrowed so easily? For myself, I am determined to seek my friend, till I know of his death, or have found him. He may be near us now, or he may be a thousand miles away, or in depths beyond our imaginations. What can we tell, with so little to guide our guessing? And for you, if we can

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discover whether we have yet intruded into one of the Sacred Places to which the treaty alludes, it may make a vital difference to the action which you should take for your own security."

She answered, "Let us try," and we rose, and moved again as quietly as possible into the lighted room. I do not think that this was really necessary, but it gave us a sense of secrecy to interrogate the red globe from the shorter distance, and appeared to reduce the risk that our thoughts would disturb the mind of the sleeper.

Chapter Nine

THE FLAME OF LIFE

FOR a long time we asked questions to which we could obtain no answer, or not such as conveyed any meaning to us.

We tried to learn the extent and depth of the domain of the Dwellers, and the location of the Reservations in which my friend might be confined. But the book was not a geography. Neither was it a first volume.

Its records evidently assumed a mass of knowledge which we did not possess.

We made progress of a kind when it occurred to me that it would give us some indication of the probable extent of the subter-

ranean world if we could learn its population.

"How many are there of the nation of the Dwellers?" I queried.

There was no answer.

"How many were there last year?"

No answer came.

"Have you any records of population?"

It seemed as though there were a mental impulse of hesitation, but still no answer came.

"How many children were born last year?" it occurred to me to ask.

The answer was immediate. *It was reported to the Council of Five that three boys had been born in the Great Nursery, and one in the Place of Renunciation.*

"And how many girls?" I replied, in a natural supposition that this information was incomplete, but there was no answer.

I then went back, querying from year to year, getting for each year a similar answer but with a total that increased as the years receded, and with a record of male births only, till, at ten years' distance, the reply came—

It was reported to the Council of Five that eight boys had been born in the Great Nursery, and twenty-four boys and one girl in the Place of Twilight.

I would have asked further, but my companion interposed with reason. "I think that we are learning little. If it can tell how long they live, and how many are their deaths (for as they are born, I suppose that they may die also), we can then judge how numerous they may be, but from their births only we cannot."

This we tried, but only to be met again with silence, or with baffling answers.

By persistence and variety in the form of queries we obtained allusion to "those of the Great Lethargy," and to "The Desire of the Darkness," but nothing more definite. In a final desperation I tried to obtain information by means of inquiry as to their customs of marriage, and at last obtained abstracts from the report of a very lengthy trial or debate, which threw a sombre and uncertain light upon the information which we had obtained already.

MAINLY, it consisted of a duel of argument between The First, who was evidently male, and whom we supposed to be the head of the Council of Five—and the Elected One, who was a woman.

It was evident from the moods of both that the matter with which they dealt was of a tragic and overwhelming importance, though there could hardly have been a greater contrast than was shown in the styles of their controversy.

The thoughts of The First were slow, deliberate, weighty, solemn, yet with an extremity of urging

which almost amounted to supplication. Those of the Elected One were swift, insistent, passionate, crowding thought on thought, in protest, defiance, and vindication. They were impatient with the intolerance of youth, and bold with the arrogant assurance of immortality.

It appeared that the First One put forward a new method of life for the women of their kind, or for their descendants, pleading that its adoption was essential to the continuance of the race of the Dwellers.

But with a fierce scorn she repelled it—"Do you think that women will consent to be as uncolored and alike as men? Or that they will conceal themselves in dead hangings, as in some savage infancy of the world?"

He answered slowly, "It is only this, that you will be alone if you will not. If you will not that your daughters do these things to save our race from extinction, then you will be alone in your own places. No man will come to you. It is already resolved that all shall take this vow, if you refuse to aid us."

The reply came with a swift derision. "And would they keep it for a score of sunsets? Is there a man in the Lower Places that would not come if I should call him? But it is the thing which we have resolved also. It is no threat to us. Till we have the girl, there is no man shall come near us. There is no man shall cross the Blue Darkness, nor enter into the Place of Twilight. We will not appear at the Feasts of the Inner Moon, nor at the Mimes of the Recollections. Should we rejoice in our seats on the Upper Slopes, knowing that we had doomed our daughters to be less than we?"

THE First One answered with the same deliberation as before, but with a cold finality, as one delivering a judgment from which no appeal could be made. "For six months' time, unless you sooner yield, there is no man will come near you. If you are rebellious longer, we shall use such force as may be needed that our wills may conquer, and thereafter there will be nothing of the Place of Twilight, nor of the Blue Darkness, nor of the Place of Preparation.

"If your seats be in the Upper Slopes at the time of the Great Assembly, are not these seats made by the hands of men?

"Are they not known as the Given Places?

"That which we give we can take.

"If there be any wisdom among you, all these things may continue; but for your daughters is a different way."

His thought smote the mind decisively, as a doom relentless and unescapable, but it did not daunt the courage nor abase the mockery of the thought that met it. "You

threaten that which is beyond your power, nor do we fear, nor believe you. In six months' time you will not waste the Blue Darkness nor the Place of Twilight, for if we do not have the girl by the next new moon, we will ourselves destroy them. *Tell your young men that.* Tell them that we shall uproot the Wilderness and the Five Approaches. You may counsel; but will they refrain? You may threaten; but will they act?

"You are old and weary of life, but we have learnt by your failure. But we will not resign our customs either in the Choosing of Males, or in the Rites of the Preparations. Shall our daughters be less than we? Or shall we degrade ourselves that others may come after us? We are ourselves the race, and it is in ourselves that it shall continue."

At this point, as a book may be illustrated, so the thought changed to picture, and we had a moment's sight of the protagonists as they had appeared as these thoughts were contended.

They were in a lighted space in a hall of vast and shadowy gloom, so that even their giant forms were dwarfed by its proportions. They were in the midst of a great assembly, through and over which there was a diffused light, coming from no visible source, so that the gloom deepened on every side towards the vaulted roof, and the invisible distance of the walls.

She stood forward from a group of women, vital as herself, multicolored in their nudity. But she stood out from them like a living flame, the ruddy orange of her hair continuing in a lengthened ridge along the spine, dividing the fire-hued back that softened forward to a paler gold.

THERE was no speech from her lips, for their thoughts leapt out too swiftly for words, but they were parted in mockery, and her eyes were alight with defiance, as The First leaned forward from his high throned seat, and threw out sudden hands of pleading as he increased the intensity of the thought with which he assailed her.

"You boast that you will not die, as we have boasted before you. You boast that you will not tire. Are there no women in the Place of Forgetting? Are there not those among them that are as vigorous as yourself, and with a beauty that may last for millenniums? Yet love cannot allure them. If those that have been dearest approach, they regard them with indifferent eyes. We show them birth, and they are not awakened.

They see death, and have no care to avoid it.

"Look at myself!"—he rose up from the throne, and stood erect, strong, active, as though he were an ivory statue of perpetual youth —"is there one of the young men

who seek the Place of Twilight who is more strong or more graceful?—One whom I could not overcome with my hands in the Place of Trials? Will it not still be so for a millennium of the years to be—And for another—and another?

"*And yet I know.* I have heard the call that will grow louder. I have felt the desire of the Silence—and it will grow, though today it be powerless. It will conquer, though today it be impotent.

"As you boast today, have we not boasted before you?

"We think to last in the Perpetual Places, but the night will find us, even as it falls on the rain-drenched roof of the world, where our ancestors once crouched and shivered.

"We have conquered cold. We have defeated darkness. We have tamed heat till it licks our feet like a fawning dog. We have resisted corruption. But there is a night of the soul that falls across the procession of unending years, against which, one by one, we fight a battle that is always lost.

". . . And every year our race declines, and our women-children are fewer.

"Therefore, each for each, shall you take the Males of our choosing, forgetting the Caprice of Choice, and the Seven Grounds of Rejection. Therefore shall the girl go not to the Place of Preparation, but to the toil of the fish-tanks, and so in turn shall the two that are younger——"

IT WAS at this point that my comrade interrupted, not impatiently, but with a quick suggestion that the discussion to which we were attending was of no immediate assistance, and when I assented somewhat reluctantly—for I had been more interested than she in the situation which was revealed by the disputation—she went on to suggest that the book we were consulting so industriously was not likely to contain anything of a greater value.

She added, "I think that we are not merely wasting time, but incurring a needless peril. I think that there is little doubt that we have penetrated into the Sacred Places where the Dwellers did not wish us to enter, and it may be that we have already encountered the reason for this reluctance. It is not likely that they would wish this information as to the condition of their nation to be known, even to their friends, and still less that there should be any possibility that it might be carried farther to those who are at enmity with them. There may be other things which might be learnt which would be still more to their detriment. It might be fatal to both of us should we be discovered in this occupation, while we have little hope of any resulting gain, for it is not the history of past days which we need

to know, but rather the place where your friend is confined, the means of secret approach, the method by which he may be freed, and the safest road of escape to the outer world when we have released him."

I answered, "You are right, as you usually are. But we have a proverb that we may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, which appears applicable to our present circumstances. If our movements and occupation be within the knowledge of the Dwellers, our prospect of escape is already too small to be interesting. If they have no knowledge, as yet, of where we are, I suggest that we may do well to discover the library from which this volume had apparently been taken, where there may be other books of a more direct utility."

My companion assented, though doubtfully. "It is an added risk, for an uncertain gain; yet it is true that if we turn back now, we have very little to set against the certain peril which we have incurred by penetrating into these secret places. Nor have we any guidance to direct our search in subterranean ways, the extent of which may be greater even than we have previously anticipated—and even the search for the library which we suppose to exist does not appear to be a very simple enterprise."

I knew that. The librarian, if such she were, had followed us down the passage, and must have come either from the surface world, or from one of the other passages that we had passed. The latter was the more probable supposition. But which passage should we prefer? And how far should we explore it before turning back and attempting the other?

THE search for such a library, even should it exist, might be as difficult as for the ultimate destination at which we were aiming. I saw also that time had become of greater importance to my companion than to myself. I had still the best part of the year before me. She had days only, if she were to return within the limit fixed by the treaty. To both of us it might be of the greatest moment to escape unseen from the Sacred Places, if these were really they. For myself, there was the consideration that, should she return within the allotted period, I should be left without the aid of her counsel, or the support of her vitality.

It was under the influence of these thoughts that I suggested, "Suppose we wait here for a time, watching from the farther side of the passage. It may be that she will wake, and herself return the book to the library, and we would follow unseen. Otherwise, we might follow her in any other direction which she might take, which would be as likely to bring us to some definite issue, as wandering blindly in the darkness of these passages

—and we know how much easier is the walking when she goes before us. But if she should sleep beyond our patience we will search ourselves without further waiting."

My companion answered, still doubtfully, "I don't think it likely that she brought the book simply to return it, for why then should she not have given it the information where it was, without bringing it here at all? But it may be so. It shall be as you will."

BEFORE we commenced our vigil, I made a further venture into the lighted room, for I had seen that both water and food (the breadlike cake which I had found when first I ventured below the surface) were among the articles that stood against the left-hand wall, and the chance was too good to lose.

I have wondered since, in the light of these experiences, how far the furtive lives of those creatures who exist behind the skirting-boards of our houses are to be either pitied or envied. I fed, as mouse feeds, venturing audaciously for bedside crumbs while a light still burns, and the fear, real enough, and with sufficient cause, which came as I watched the huge form that might rise at any moment and chase me with a monstrous hand outstretched, must be off-set by the satisfaction that the meal gave to the alertness of my physical being, and to the joyous sense of a hazard won with which I rejoined my companion in the outer darkness.

For (have I not said already?) the darkness in the passage was absolute. Even immediately in front of the open doorway, the darkness fell like a curtain.

Here arises an issue on which I am in two minds continually. In this strange world we were constantly surrounded by phenomena which were not explicable by any knowledge I possessed, nor consistent with any previous experiences. So was it here. I was accustomed to light that invaded darkness and gradually died as its source was distanced, but here was light which was sharply defined in its area—which ended evenly and abruptly. To explain this is necessary for my narrative. But that necessity is incidental. We were surrounded by phenomena which were equally new, but which were entirely irrelevant. Sometimes I was able to imagine an explanation: sometimes not. Sometimes the cause became clear subsequently, or was told to me. I should like to tell of all these things, but I have a tale to tell also. I am of one mind to turn aside, and of another mind to go forward. But I see that if I would reach the conclusion at which I aim, I must restrain my desire to wander.

We sat for some time in the darkness against the opposite wall watching the form of the Dweller, who did not move, and was still

apparently sleeping. There was no means of judging the passage of time, but it was long since I had slept, and after the meal I had to confess to an increasing drowsiness, on which my companion suggested that I should use the time in sleep, which I required at shorter intervals than herself, while she would watch for us both.

Chapter Ten

VISIONS

I DO not know how long I slept, but suppose it to have been for many hours. I waked to find that nothing had changed. Invigorated by rest, I was quite willing to agree that we should wait no longer, but proceed at once upon our own investigations of this overbearing environment.

Rising with this purpose, our eyes were first attracted to the wall behind us in which was depicted one of those living scenes with which we had already become familiar.

Strange and wonderful as they then seemed, I have since realized that there were many simpler-seem-

ing things around me which are less easily explicable.

Knowing, as we do, that light travels through space, bearing the vision of that which was, to the infinite distances, and that we ourselves can behold the stars of earlier millenniums in positions which they have long ceased to occupy, it is not difficult to understand that the Dwellers must have discovered a process by which such visions could be deflected or reflected back to the earth from which they originated, and that it was the past history of the earth which was unfolded through the walls of these dark and (as we subsequently realized) seemingly unending corridors.

THE substance of the walls on which these scenes were displayed excited but did not gratify my curiosity. The effect was as though looking through a dark mirror which gave a moving scene on a large scale. The impression was not as is that of a moving picture, but of great actual distances opening before us. Or, in another place, the view might be blocked immediately by rising ground, by trees, or by buildings. There did not appear to be any selection either of place or time. They were not scenes of dramatic moment, or of selected beauty: they were not seen from any position of special advantage. They appeared to develop at the same rate that they had done in original fact, so that, if you should wish to know what would happen next month you must watch or return at that interval, to observe it.

I tried to place my hand on the wall, expecting to encounter some substance of a glassy smoothness, but I felt no physical contact whatever—only an inability to move my hand farther forward.

My companion, more sensitive than myself to any neighbouring substance, could only tell me that she had an impression as of a transparent solidity, but of a substance which she had never previously encountered.

It was another point of interest, for which I have no explanation, that these scenes, or pictures, were not continuous, nor were they divided sharply from one another, but the outlines would become faint and blurred, till they were no more than faintly-colored mist, which, as we continued to move beside it, would again show blurred outlines that would develop, farther on, into a quite different scene.

The view which we now beheld was that of a sunny downland, unfenced and green, beside which we might not have paused but for the sight of a mass of rock, the memento doubtless of some volcanic or glacial activity, which rose from the level green. It was flat-sided at its nearest view, and a figure crouched before it, with his back toward us, but somewhat sideways. He was man-like in shape and

size, quite naked, olive-green in color, with a round blue patch, of the size of a tea-plate, stained or painted between his shoulders. It may have been a mark of honor, or a sign of servitude, or of merely ornamental significance. His hair, which was thickly coarse, and black, was drawn over one shoulder in a heavy plait.

HE WAS sitting on doubled legs, the feet showing clearly. They were strangely long, and slender. The middle toe was the longest, and ended in a strong curving claw.

He was carving on the face of the rock with some rude tool that I could not see plainly. He was so absorbed in his work that a small bird, which was hovering restlessly near, took courage, and slipped into a thorny gorse-like bush, which grew against the stone, doubtless to the rescue of eggs that were chilling. I cannot say that it was gorse. It was not in flower. But the grass might have grown on the downs of my own time. I saw the fragile blue of harebells among it, and only one plant, a clover-like copper-colored herbage, which I could not recognize. Yet the man, if such I may call him, was strange enough, and so was a small rabbit-like creature, with a long tail, thick at the root, which slapped the ground as it moved, which was feeding nearer and nearer to the silent figure—only to disappear with a series of zig-zag rushes when the man sat back suddenly.

But he had only paused to consider his work. He showed his face now, low, broad, angular, but not uncomely, or unintelligent, having very prominent black brows that balanced the sharp projecting tusk-like teeth at the mouth-corners.

He sat back now to survey his work, with eyes that were yellow and very bright. He was evidently absorbed in it, to the exclusion of other consciousness. As he sat and considered it, he bent round a flexible leg and scratched his belly absently with the long central toe. It was not a human action. I could see what he had drawn now. It was a bird, in shape somewhat like a hen, of the old-English game-fowl breed, not with the distorted lankiness of the show-pen monstrosities which succeeded it. But it had an impression of great size, and, rudely though it was drawn, the head and beak had an expression of vulture-like rapacity. There were no spurs on its legs.

And then we saw the bird itself, advancing quietly over the down behind him.

It must have been eight or nine feet in height, possibly more. It was obviously stalking him, moving with careful slowness, foot by foot, its neck stretched before it, its great beak half-open, its wings (which were short, and showed a mass of fluffy feathers, somewhat

like those of an ostrich) lifted, but not moving.

He was absorbed in his work again, and appeared unaware of the approaching danger. I felt an impulse to call, to warn him. It was all so near, so real, watching the sunny scene, and seeing the grass move as the wind stirred it.

The great bird was within twenty yards now, a greedy anticipation in the eyes that never left the prey they were stalking. I knew that the lifted wings and the stretched neck were in a tremor of anticipation for the final rush, when it should have crept so near that to attempt escape would be hopeless. Would nothing warn him? Had those long, queer flexible legs the power to outdistance such a creature? Or had he any means of defense should the warning come?

THE twenty yards were ten now —and the rush came. It was too swift and sudden for the eye to follow, and yet it failed of its object. The bird's impetus simply dashed against the bare rocks, on which itself was depicted. The expected victim—had he really heard the approach and feigned his ignorance till the last second?—had leapt straight upward, more, I thought, like a kangaroo than a man, touched a moment upon the top of the stone, and descended upon the farther side.

The bird rushed round it. So did the man. The circuit was so short, the speed so great, that it was difficult to say which was pursuing the other. I thought that if the man increased his speed but a trifle he would be on the flying heels of his pursuer. In fact, that happened. The bird knew it, and tried to turn, but was a half-second too late, as it had been previously. The man had leapt on to its back. Its beak was twisted round to tear him, but his two hands gripped the scraggy feathered throat and held it off. The long neck jerked desperately. But the man's grip was inexorable. It found that, with all its wrenching, it could not break clear: with all its efforts it could not get its beak near enough to tear him.

Balancing on one leg, it raised the other to pull him off, as a hen scratches her eye. An olive-green thigh reddened where a long claw caught it, but then the man's leg, that seemed so strangely flexible, was twisted round the attacking limb, and had gained control of the danger.

The bird staggered, and its leg came to ground again. As it did so, I saw the man reach up his other foot, the long central claw catching in the skinny throat, just below where he had gripped it beneath the beak. He drove it in, and tore downward. The bird plunged violently. Bird and man came to the ground together in a flurry of feathers. Then the man leapt clear. He leapt far forward, over its head, a bound of twenty feet, if not

thirty, with a head that looked back as he did so. But the bird did not follow. It lay where it had fallen. Blood poured from the opened throat, a bright scarlet on the green grass. The legs kicked, and were still.

The man came back cautiously. The bird had died just beneath the picture which he had made. He looked from one to the other, and his gaze was troubled. He picked up the head, and raised it with the limp neck till it was at the height of his shoulder. He appeared to compare it with his drawing, and was not contented.

It was only after this that he showed consciousness of his own wound. There was a long gash on the side of the thigh, and the blood ran to his foot. Probably it was not deep. He jumped twice, and the bleeding increased. He threw back his head, and his mouth opened widely. We supposed that he was calling loudly, though we could hear nothing. He did this several times.

Then he sat down by the dead bird, and waited.

WE STOOD there for a few minutes longer, but nothing happened, and we passed on.

I was puzzled by the sight of creatures different from anything of which bone or fossil had told us, and yet seeming to be of an earlier world than mine. But perhaps they were later. There had been time for many changes since then.

Then I caught sight of my companion's foot, with its central toe. A grotesque resemblance struck me between the two feet. Had I witnessed a link which connected her through the changing millenniums with my earlier humanity? No, there was no other resemblance. The idea was absurd.

Yet I gave her the thought when she asked it, though I meant it for her amusement only.

She took it with an abstract seriousness, pausing before she answered, "You are giving me new thoughts, as you often do. The resemblance seems slight, and the connection unlikely. What is the shape of a foot, considered beside the other differences? In many ways we are less unlike to each other than is either to the creature we have been watching. But I have not thought of these changes. In many centuries there has been little difference in the sea-creatures. Perhaps such changes take place more rapidly on the land. Yet there have been changes in the sea, enough to show that such things are.

"And if they be, they must have been in every grade of difference, and in others beyond thought or counting. Can we, who are the thoughts of God, imagine what He had not thought? Must it not be, if we think it?"

I answered, "I cannot follow that. To the thinking of my kind,

we are, in part at least, alien from, and displeasing to our Creator, Whose thoughts are very different from ours."

She replied, "You may be right. I have no opinion on that. For, to me, your thought has no meaning."

Chapter Eleven

WAR

I DO not think that I should have been content to leave the argument, for it was ever our way to continue through disagreement or misunderstanding until we had arrived at a point of harmony, but that, at the moment, we both became aware of steps that were approaching to meet us.

We had not gone many yards from the lighted doorway, and we withdrew against the wall in a common impulse of silence.

The steps were evidently those of another of the Dwellers, and as he passed without apparently becoming aware of our presence in the darkness, and continued along

the passage, we should probably have gone on our purposed way, as soon as the dangers of detection were over, had he not turned in at the open doorway, on seeing which we were at one in our inclination to return sufficiently to observe what would happen.

We were well content that we had done this, when we observed him go to the living ball, and bend down beside it, putting a hand to the ground after removing the imprisoning ring, on which it began at once to clamber up the slanting arm, turning over with a ball-like motion, and perching on his shoulder, in the manner which we had observed already.

WE NOTICED that the newcomer was much less in height than were the Dwellers, either man or woman, that we had observed previously, and from this, and other youthful indications, it was not difficult to understand that we were watching a youth who had not yet gained his full gigantic stature.

The sleeping figure did not stir, nor did he address himself to her, and I suppose that he would have gone on to the library to which the book was to be returned (for we had been right in this supposition, as the event proved, excepting only that it was the work of a subordinate, and not of the Librarian herself), but that, as he turned to leave the chamber, he was confronted by another youth, of his own age, who came from the opposite direction, and with an appearance of haste and excitement, such as I had not observed among these people previously.

He commenced speaking immediately, and, as he did so, the Librarian arose from her couch so instantly and so quietly as to lead me to wonder whether she had been asleep at all.

The messenger assailed her mind as she rose with a pressure of thought of which I could feel the impact, though I could not interpret it clearly, and appeared to be unable to avoid supplementing it with a useless triplication of speech and gesture. His auditor surveyed his excitement with a cool detachment which emphasized the millenniums of years that divided them. When he had finished, she took back the book from his waiting companion, and gave it an obviously quieter and briefer narrative. Then she lay down again, while the two youths left the chamber together, taking the book with them.

It was doubtless their excited condition that caused them to move so rapidly that we had to quicken to a run to keep within sound of their footsteps.

They led us back to the end of the passage, and then along the curving way, till we came to the next of the dark openings—the one that led directly opposite to that by

which we had entered beneath the temple. We followed them along it for about a quarter of a mile, finding it was in all respects alike to the other, being entirely dark, but having similar scenes developing within its walls continually. Had I been alone, I think that I could hardly have controlled my curiosity concerning some of them —for I kept sufficiently close to the wall to observe them as we hurried past—but I was too conscious of the useless folly of lingering to make such a suggestion to my companion.

I had short glimpses of a score of scenes which I had no time to consider, and which left no clear impression, but of a bewildering variety of landscapes, and once of a tossing windswept sea, beneath a clouded moon. I caught no sight of human life, except once only, when I thought there was a distant string of horsemen trailing wearily along a muddy trampled road, but the scene was obscured by a storm of hail, and before I could be sure of what I had seen, it had been left behind.

FOLLOWING in the wake of the two youths, we moved without difficulty, and kept so nearly behind them that it became necessary to stop very abruptly when they halted in the darkness.

We heard them turn to the left-hand wall and then a vertical line of fuchsia-colored light showed and widened, as a double door slid backward on either hand.

They went in through this door, and we followed to the entrance, secure in the fact that no light fell outward. It rose up like a wall of purple transparency where the door had opened, but it did not penetrate the darkness in which we stood.

Looking inward we saw, on either hand, high and low, long tiers of racks on which such living books as that which we had already seen were ranged in close and orderly rows. They were of somewhat different sizes, usually about twice that of a man's head, but more like a large marble in the hands of those who owned them.

The space between the shelves was wide enough for the two Dwellers to move side by side, and was more than proportionately lofty; yet, by reason of its length, it had an effect of narrowness.

Down this alley the bearer of the living history strode for a few paces, to put it in its place on the rack to which it belonged, his friend moving beside him. My companion's mind called me, "Come quickly," and together we crossed the threshold.

As in our own libraries, the lowest tier of books was close to the ground. There was just room beneath the rack for us to stand in comfort. We were under it in a moment.

As we reached this shelter, they

turned back. They went out, and the sliding doors closed behind them.

I DISLIKED the closing of those doors. It reminded me of one that had closed three nights ago in the darkness. My companion read my mind with some amusement. "It was your proposal," she suggested.

"But I don't like being shut in."

"How can it matter, till we want to get out?" she answered. "Why will you always worry over troubles you haven't got? We wanted to find the place, and here it is. We wanted to get into it, and here we are. Even though we should worry later, when we may want to get out, we ought to be glad now. Let us be glad that we are undisturbed, and see what knowledge we can acquire which may aid us."

Her coolness made my fears seem foolish (as, indeed, they were), and it was in a recovered serenity that I joined her mind to my own in exploring the storehouse of knowledge which we had penetrated so strangely.

We emerged from our cover, and walked along the lofty aisle between the racks—pigmies whose hands would scarcely reach to the second shelf, and whose heads did not reach to the first one.

It was a strange sensation. Even in a library of dead books there is an atmosphere of knowledge, and of the presence of many forgotten, ghostly minds. Each room has its own aroma. You may wander with closed eyes into the divinity section, but you will know at once that you are not in that of fiction or biography. The atmosphere in a room devoted to sporting books is different from that of one which is occupied with medical subjects. That is so with dead books; but these were living. Living books on either side, clamoring to be read, and we could not read them. Their desire met ours, but we had no key to their treasures. They would each answer to the right question, but having no knowledge of what they contained, we asked of each in turn for that which it could not give, and an unwilling silence rebuffed us.

Faced by this dilemma, we decided to seek the one book which we knew, and gain the information which it had received since last we probed it.

We found it without difficulty, about forty yards along on the seventh tier on the left hand. We both recognized it, high above us though it was, for these books were not alike. They were all of the same color, lobster-red, but the shades varied with each. They all had the little swaying hands that turned and balanced the living globes, but there was a difference in each: a difference of personality. They were subtly individualized by the kind of knowledge which they contained.

SO WE came to the one of which we knew something already, and received the last record which we had seen communicated to it. It was brief and colorless, compared to the evident excitement and long report of the mind which had brought it, but it was sufficiently momentous, even to me, and more so when my companion (who had already followed much of it, and on some points had learnt more details than were in the recorded narrative) had explained it to me. It ran thus:

At one fifth after dawn on (here followed a symbol of date, which conveyed no meaning to my mind) *the fourteenth patrol, on reaching the coast-ridge, observed two Antipodeans approaching from the east. After skirting the protective belt for some distance, one of them attempted to turn into it, lost balance, and recovered with difficulty. They then soared to a height of . . .* (about four miles) *when one of them drew backward, and charged the belt at a very high speed. It fell when the most part of its bulk was over the belt, but so that its tail lay in the sea. It was then inspected as closely as possible, and was seen to be disabled, but not dead. It was observed to be differently formed from any previously seen, so that it was less damaged than would have been anticipated from so great a fall. It was presumed to be dying, as its companion descended to the surface of the water, and commenced to take off its contents through the tail. Orders were given for the Blue Fire to be used, which was done twice, but with only partial success, so that seven Dwellers are dead. Before noon, it was observed that life was extinct in its main cell, and its companion retreated. Report was made to the laboratories; from which orders were issued for the sufficient flaying of two thousand of the grey-skinned males.*

IT WAS clear from this, even to me, that war was commenced against the Dwellers by some alien species; but the record was exasperating in its brevity, and puzzling in the particulars which it supplied, so that I turned to my companion for explanation.

She answered me readily, though not without a suggestion that we were wasting time over matters that did not directly concern us.

"Of the last sentence I can give no explanation, but the remainder is clear enough, excepting only that I do not know how or why there should have been any deaths to the Dwellers. We knew already that war was recommencing between the Antipodeans and themselves, which could only mean that they are being attacked, as it is not likely that they would attempt to cross the sea or air to assail the Antipodeans, which would be absurd. Why should they? It would

be too unpleasant. The Dwellers cannot travel under water, and even we avoid the surface around the coasts of the Antipodeans. Some of my nation have seen the Dwellers experimenting with the Blue Fire, though I have not. That was many centuries ago. It moves about like a living thing. The report suggests to my mind that the result of the attack is not entirely satisfactory to the Dwellers, though it has resulted in the destruction of one of their enemies. But if we allow our minds to be occupied by these events, which do not concern us, we are making them detrimental rather than helpful."

I answered, "But, surely, they are of interest to you, because of the alliance you have mentioned, for which I suppose that your own nation might suffer, should the Dwellers fail in the conflict."

BUT this suggestion did not perturb her.

"It is difficult to imagine how we could suffer," she replied, "for though we might, in theory at least be attacked on the Grey Beaches, it could not be done without our having ample time to vacate them, and we could retire, were the need sufficient, to the ocean depths, where we could dwell for ever, and where neither side could pursue us.

"The position of the Dwellers is different. Although they have made their homes within the body of the earth, they appear to find it necessary to control, or have access to, some portion of the surface; or, at least, they are unwilling to resign it. Obviously, they could not hold it in safety or comfort, if the Antipodeans were always likely to be feeding upon them."

"I wish," I answered, "you would give me some explanation, or sight, of what these Antipodeans are, when many things might be clearer to me. The Dwellers do not appear to me as creatures who would be easily eaten, or who lack means of defense. I suppose that these creatures, which have the power of flight (which the Dwellers do not attempt?) must be as formidable in mind as they appear to be huge in body."

"They are certainly large," she answered, "but I can say little as to their minds. I am not sure that they have any. They are not easy to understand. But I can show you them as they appeared in the mind of the messenger, when he reported of this fighting."

Then she gave my mind a vision of sunlit space, with some white cumulus clouds drifting below, and of a flying insect—nothing more than that.

It had three pairs of transparent horizontal wings, and beetle-like, copper-colored wing-cases, stiffly lifted, but moving occasionally, as though to steer or balance the flying form.

It seemed small to me, because

there was no standard of comparison in that high void, and because I had a mind which assumed the smallness of insects.

It drew back—hovered—flew forward at its utmost speed, with wing-beats too swift to follow—checked in its flight with an incredible suddenness, as though it had struck an invisible obstacle—and fell headlong.

MY MIND followed it as it fell, and it was only as the earth rushed upward to meet it that I was aware that it was of such a size that an elephant might have traveled as a flea on its back. Though it fell headlong, it did not turn over in the air, but appeared to be steadied from the tail.

Though it was so huge, and fell from so great a height, it was not destroyed by the impact. It was not even broken. It lay with wings spread flatly over such a growth of glossy leaves as I had seen on my first morning with the pink tongues licking upward between them.

There was no height of cliff at this point. Compared with the monster's bulk, the shore showed no great shelving. It lay with a long tail in the water, and the end afloat on a calm sea.

But though it was unbroken, it did not appear uninjured. It had a curiously flattened appearance, and though the tail moved at times, the rest of the body appeared unable to do so.

Then the scene blurred, as though the narrator's mind had failed to picture its report, and cleared again to show it lying beneath a hail of blue lightning. Only, the shafts of light did not flash and cease, but remained visible, like blue whiplashes, striking and recoiling around their disabled victim. I could not see from where they came.

Beneath this attack, the gauze-like wings shrivelled and disappeared. The long tail lashed out, beating the water to tempest.

But when the lightnings struck the still-lifted wing-sheathes, or the lustrous head, they slipped off harmlessly; and when some of them attempted to penetrate beneath the sheathes, they were not repelled, but appeared to be drawn in against their own wills, by a force which they resisted vainly, though some made a better struggle than others, and disappeared very slowly.

Then I was aware of another of these monstrous insects flying low over the water. As it neared the conflict, its head drew back into a neck-like collar, which shone with a metallic lustre, similar to that of the wing-sheathes. The front pair of sheathes lifted and adjusted their positions, till they formed a vertical shield to the advancing monster.

The blue lightnings, under no visible controls, grouped and advanced through the air to meet their new adversary.

Swiftly as an eyelid winks, a glow of petunia-red appeared and faded on the polished sheathes.

Instantly, the lightnings separated, and drew back. They reminded me, grotesquely enough, of a pack of dogs that had brought a beast to bay which they would not leave, but lacked the strength to pull down.

Then, almost too swiftly for sight to follow, they struck—all, I thought, at one spot beneath the withdrawn head. As they did so, the petunia light glowed again, and in the same instant they recoiled, writhing curiously, as though sentient and damaged.

After that, they disappeared entirely.

Freed from the annoyance of these attacks, the fallen monster lay quiet. The convulsions of its tail ceased.

The rescuer, still almost upon the surface of the water, turned its head seaward, and twined its tail around that of its companion.

SO IT remained for some time, with rapidly-beating wings, stationary above the water. While it did so, its bulk appeared to increase, while that of the fallen appeared to lessen, so that it lay flatter than before, and its tail became flabby.

When they parted, the one lay inert, with no further sign of life, while the other rose heavily, as though sated by a full meal.

I was stopped from further observation by the impatience of my companion's mind.

"Shall we not seek the things that more nearly concern us?" she suggested.

I agreed, but added, "I am puzzled by what I have seen, and it would take you little time to explain it, if you are able to do so. Are these great bulks alive? Or do they contain smaller living creatures that control them, as did an airship in the world of the past that I left?"

She answered, "Why not both? And if both, why should you suppose that the smaller will control the greater?" And when she saw that her thought confused my mind for a moment, she went on, "You know that I have a body which is entirely mine, and which is clear of any alien life; and I know that you have a body over which you have little influence, except in some of its muscular activities, because a countless number of separate lives are within you, and do not accept your authority. You have shown me that you do not control the actions of a single corpuscle of your blood, and were you able, you have not the requisite knowledge to enable you to do so intelligently.

"But why should there not be such separate smaller life existing either in subordination, or in control, of a larger physical body, and yet able to sever connection with-

out loss of vitality, as the dominant will may direct?"

"The idea you give me," I answered, "is as that of a living ship, which is yet controlled by the crew it carries. Are the Antipodeans really of this kind?"

"I cannot tell you that," she replied, "I only showed you that you were assuming more than is indicated by what we have seen. I can only tell you that they dominate the most part of the world, and that their dead bodies are so frequently lying on the shores of the lands they inhabit as to suggest that they must be very short-lived. But they are too antipathetic for us to land on those shores, or have any dealings with them."

Chapter Twelve

THE FATE OF TEMPLETON

WHATEVER interest might lie in the spectacle of Titanic conflict which we had witnessed, it was of little direct assistance to our present purpose. It showed that the Dwellers might be sufficiently occupied by more important matters to be unlikely to give much attention to our escape or capture, but we had known that already. If the moment were propitious, there were the greater reason for acting swiftly, and when we found that there was nothing further to be gained from the one volume which we had been able to interrogate, we resolved to cut the knot of our difficulty by a systematic inquiry,

from corridor to corridor, for any record of the Vivisection Department, which had been mentioned as dealing with one, at least, of those for whom I was searching.

Even then, our inquiry might have been long and difficult, had we not obtained an immediate response from an index, which was almost beside us, at the entrance to the library, from which point we had resolved to commence our inquiry.

It replied, "The 92nd on the 14th row, in the Hall of Dead Books, contains a plan of the Level of the Inquirers, which includes the Bureau of Prehistoric Zoology, and the Places of Vivisection. The plan is that of the 28th of the Lower Levels, below the Division. The 73rd book on the 2nd tier on the left-hand side of the 83rd corridor contains an account of all vivisections during the last five moons."

We went at once to the latter book, as it was the nearer, and it was here that we gained the first sight—at least in picture—of one of those whose absence had brought me on this strange adventure.

After we had inquired through much detail, sometimes fascinating in its enigmatic suggestions, sometimes repellent in its exhibitions of what appeared to me to be a very callous brutality, we were shown a table, by the side of which, as I thought at the first glance, a naked man stood with a pair of pincers in his right hand, in which something of the size of a large rat was squirming.

There was a row of five large jars upon the table before him, into the first of which he plunged the object of his attention, holding it immersed for about half-a-minute, and withdrawing it in a half-drowned condition.

I SAW it clearly as it came out, and recognized the red hair of Templeton with a shock of horror.

Instantly, the proportions of the room were changed by my knowledge of the identity of the victim. I recognized in the naked man the giant form of a Dweller, and became aware of the huge size of the row of jars before him.

I watched Templeton, now hanging limply in the pincers, plunged into a second, third, and fourth of these jars, being raised to the level of the operator's eyes, and inspected carefully after each immersion. But the fourth inspection was more prolonged than the others, and after making it the Dweller turned to another table, and laid his victim, still in the grip of the pincers, upon a yellow disc that was let into its surface. As the limp body touched the metal it was galvanized into an activity that kicked and writhed with a furious impotence. Lifted again, it was plunged into a globe of light of a white intensity, against which its body showed transparent, every organ, every in-

ternal movement in lung, and artery, and intestine, being clearly indicated.

It appeared that this test had confirmed the unfavorable indications of the fourth immersion, for the body was now withdrawn from the light, and thrown carelessly into a mesh-sided tray upon the floor, in which a number of non-human creatures of unfamiliar kinds were already heaped and squirming. The Dweller pressed a stud with his foot, and the tray slid from the room. I did not follow it further.

I felt almost physically sick with repulsion from the brutality which I had witnessed, as I waited while my companion's mind continued to receive the picture.

After a short time, she broke connection also and addressed herself to me.

"We now know," she thought, "the fate of at least one of your companions, and it must be a cause of satisfaction to you that you have pursued your inquiries successfully, and that you are relieved of further trouble by the fact that he had a body which was not worth preservation."

"I felt sure that they were about to destroy him," I answered, "and could not endure to look longer. How did they do it?"

SHE showed me an instant's picture of the scene as her mind had followed it. I saw his still-living body in the jaws of half-a-dozen pig-like animals to whom it had been thrown for their fattening. My companion recognized the repulsion that disturbed my mind with a puzzled wonder, and a sympathetic curiosity.

"I wish," she thought, "that I could understand the feeling which moves you."

"I wish," I answered, "that I could understand how you can reject all violence as evil, and yet condone such actions."

"I condone nothing," she replied, with a friendly coolness which tended to reduce the temperature of my own thoughts. "I am not concerned to defend or condemn. I am merely curious of your own repulsion. Your fellow-primitive introduced a body which is diseased or defective. It is so seriously so that the Dwellers, after a patient examination, do not think it either fit to continue, or to be used for their own food, and they therefore use it for the fattening of healthier creatures. What better could they do? If you identify yourself with him, should you not be grateful for the trouble to which they went?"

I paused a moment, knowing that the query required something better than a random answer, and the pause lengthened to silence.

Feeling might still remain, but judgment answered too plainly.

I had forgotten once again that we were alien and inferior crea-

tures, of an uninvited coming. Did not my own race feed one living animal to another in their zoological reservations? Would they have taken the preliminary trouble to examine the body of such a creature? When they decided to reduce the number of the tame and trusting doves in their capital city, had they sufficient care or intelligence to select the weaker or diseased for destruction?

Did they not kill and torture countless thousands of other creatures, even including those that they had bred and trained to friendship, to gratify curiosity or to gain some possible advantage to themselves in combating the diseases that their vices earned?

Could that which I had seen be properly described as vivisection of any kind? Such things might be; and I had little confidence that the Dwellers would hesitate to practice such infamies, but, in fact, I had not seen them.

I ANSWERED simply, "I was unreasonable, and you have taught me wisdom, as you do so often."

"I am less sure of that," she answered doubtfully, "for there is something in your mind by which my own is confused and baffled. I can neither understand it, nor be sure that you are entirely in error. We stand aloof from violence, as you do not, nor do the Dwellers. But you have two standards of judgment. You regard your own violence to others as more tolerable than is theirs to you. This to me appears as though you make assertion of your own inferiority. But I do not know . . . Shall we inquire further as to the fate of your second friend?"

"Will you do it for me?" I answered. "I do not wish to see it."

She assented mutely, and after a short interval she reported the success of her investigation.

"Your second friend is alive and happy. His body has been cleaned and improved. I cannot discover more, as there is no record of the intentions of those who are dealing with him, but only of the facts which are past already. But I think you would do well to leave him, and inquire no further. Shall we not return to the surface together, where you may find some place of hiding, and perhaps of a permanent security?"

"I cannot do that," I answered definitely. "I could not return to say that I have learnt that he is living, and made no effort to reach him."

My thought reacted more sharply to her suggestion because I feared the adventure as I had not done previously, and was aware that, should I hesitate, my cowardice might be the harder to conquer. "Did you ascertain how far distant he has been taken?"

I suppose she quickly recognized the finality of my decision, for she

made no further protest, but answered quietly.

"He appears to be immediately beneath us, though at a great depth. But we shall have to inquire of the other book of which we were told, to learn the way by which we may reach him."

"Let us do it quickly," I replied, for the thought of Templeton writhing in the clutch of the giant pincers, while the Dweller gazed upon him and decided, coolly and judicially, upon his destruction, would not leave my mind, and I was eager to be diverted by action.

WE found the Hall of the Dead Books at the end of that in which we were. The dead books were a livid white, and, for the most part, the little hands had withered and fallen. They lay round them in a dry dust, or hung shrivelling from those that had not been long dead.

We found the book we sought without difficulty, and though it did not react to our queries with the urgent impatience of the living, its responses were mechanically prompt and accurate.

I do not tell all that we learnt as we searched the pages of this book, such as the maps of the reverse surface of the interior, and stranger things on which I am entirely silent, because we did not actually see them, and they are too incredible to be lightly added to a narrative which must appear fictitious, in any case, to the obtuse and unimaginative. It is not everyone who can realize that the human mind has no power of invention, nor that it is impossible to add to that which is infinite.

We went down in vision for five hundred miles by one continuing spiral, seeing glimpses of inexplicable things on many levels, until we came to a place in which were two colonies of the older Dwellers, each attempting to postpone the weariness of years by activities of the mind, and who were known (by the nearest synonyms in our language) as the Seekers of Wisdom, and the Seekers of Science. I write *science* rather than *knowledge* because the impression I received was similar to that which has degraded the use of the former word, so that its implication is of the assertion of speculative theories with a dogmatism equal to that of the theologians whom it despises, and with a lack of imagination and spiritual perception which insures that scientific hand-books of one decade become the derision of the next.

We ascertained and memorized very carefully the passages by which the descending spiral could be reached, and the ways which must be taken when we left it. We could not discover whether they were the channels of crowded traffic, or lonely as the dark tunnels which we had already penetrated, but we

had gained much in having learnt the way by which we must go, and our next task was to find an exit from the library.

We should have pursued this purpose, and might have continued the adventure together, and completed it successfully, had we not been drawn aside to observe a movement among the books at the farther side of the library.

It was foolish in itself, and disastrous in its consequence, but the sight which drew us was sufficiently curious to be some excuse for our error.

Chapter Thirteen

SEPARATION

IN A large room, or recess, at the side of the library, there was a tank completely covering its floor, and filled, to a depth of about three feet, with a watery liquid, slightly tinged with carmine.

An arrangement of gently-sloping boards had enabled the books of several tiers of shelves to make their way to this tank, into which they plunged, and floated with an appearance of satisfaction, working their hands in such a way that they turned over continually, in a very comical manner.

It required no very great penetration to see that this was a place of refreshment, or nourishment,

which was needed to maintain their vitality, but it was one which they could not reach without an intervening danger.

As they crossed the final plank, which was horizontal, they passed over a trap which was so adjusted that it would give way if a sufficient weight were upon it, and resume its position afterwards, and the weight required to spring it was that of a book which was mature and completed.

There was a square vat beneath this trap, filled with an indigo-colored liquid, into which, as we watched about fifty of these books hurry over the plank, two fell, their little hands struggling frantically as they slowly sank to the bottom, having found a place of death instead of the enjoyment to which they had hurried.

It was reasonable to assume that these activities indicated some directing attendant, and I had little cause for surprise when my companion's thought reached me quietly, "Do not attempt escape. We are discovered. I think you had better leave this to me. Can you be serene and confident?" Her mind closed from me, as we turned to observe the dreaded form of one of the Dwellers advancing upon us.

He stopped as we faced him, and I knew that my companion had already engaged him in the mental combat on which our lives depended. I could not follow their thoughts, which were not intended for me. I never did take the thoughts of the Dwellers with quite the same ease with which I received those of the Amphibians. Now I was conscious only of a tension of conflict, as when the swords of two duellists meet and hold, and either knows that his life is staked upon the strength of wrist that presses his opponent's blade. There was a long minute during which their wills fought in this posture, and then it was as though her blade pressed sideward, inch by inch, the one that met, and inch by inch slid down it.

SIZE has no absolute meaning. It is only relative, and, even so, it is of little importance. The smallest insect might control the earth as easily as an elephant, had either of them the brains to do so, though the one be many million times the size of the other.

Our protagonist could have crushed us both in one hand, but I felt that her will had triumphed against him. Not entirely; for minutes passed, and I knew that they still warred with contending thoughts which I could not read, but these were rather of the terms of treaty than of an unconditioned hostility.

While they fought, I had endeavored to maintain the poise of mind which she had asked. I knew that I must not think of Templeton. I fixed my attention upon the giant form which confronted us.

He was similar to the others I had seen, except in one particular. He moved with a slight limp, and his left hip showed a long downward scar, deepening to an actual pit at its lower end, and being black, with an aspect of charred wood. It showed that their bodies, however perfect and enduring, were not exempt from the danger of accident.

She turned to me at last. "Come," her mind said only. "There is an open way."

I followed her down a corridor which we had not previously penetrated, and we came to a doorway standing open, by which the attendant had entered, and to which he had directed her. As we retreated, I saw him bending over the vat, as though he were unaware of our existence.

IN THE darkness of a passage such as those with which we were already familiar, we sat down together.

"I have made terms," she commenced at once, "but it was not easy to do, and you may not like them. We are in the Sacred Places, as we had thought likely, and if we should be found here, or should it be known that we have been here, the things we have learnt will certainly cause our destruction. But I have given pledges which must be kept, and it will be as though he had not seen us. I could not have done it, were he not apart from his race, through the wound he bears, and angered by its cause, which does not concern us. He refused my will until he thought of the Seven Causes of Rejection, and his mind wavered.

"But the agreement is this. I must return at once to my own people, by a way which will be unobserved, which he has shown me, telling to none that I have seen him, nor of the things which we have seen and heard since we forced the barrier of silence.

"That was easily agreed; but your case was more difficult. He would have been willing that you should return with me, but we know that that would not be possible. He would have agreed that you should escape to the surface, and hide in the mountain caves, but I knew that you were resolved to seek your friend, and I feared that, if I should make such an agreement for you, you would not keep it. He showed me that it is a way of death to go downward, and I was not willing to leave you to perish. In the end, I have done little, but I have learnt this which may aid you. When you have found your friend, and have learnt (as I think you will) that you can do nothing to aid him, if you can then make your way to the Place of the Seekers of Wisdom, you will be in a sanctuary from which none will seek to remove you. They will question you of the life you left, and so long as you can tell them of new things they will be very sure

to keep you in safety. Even beyond that time, there is a possibility that they may transfer you to depths into which our minds have not inquired, and of which I know nothing, where you might even find that some of your own kind are existing, as do the Bat-wings, on an inner surface of the earth."

HER mind paused, expectant, to receive my pleasure.

Consternation replied—continued, hopeless, and yet protesting. Why had she agreed thus to our parting? Had she not herself urged, and did she not again suggest, that Brett was beyond my rescue? Was it not her own plan that I should return to the surface? Two passions, grief and fear, rose in an alliance of opposition. She was my one friend in a world in which I was worse than outcast—was I to part from her for ever? She was the actual physical strength, as she was the moral confidence, by which I hoped to have overcome the dangers and difficulties of the descent —having feared to adventure it in her company, was I now to go lonely?

She realized my mind with a sympathy which was without comprehension, as one might sympathize with pain who had never felt it. Perceiving it, she met it with all her strength of will and reason, as she had fought the mind of our recent opponent.

"Did you not say yourself that it was a needful thing that you should go downward? Had I not agreed that we should part, I should have lost all that I have won for both of us. If our meeting has been a pleasure (as it has to me), shall we spoil it with foolish protest now that it is completing? It will not cease to be, because the event is over. Will it not be actual in our minds as long as we desire to recall it? . . . Do you not think too much of your body, and of the risks which it must take for your service? If you heed it thus it is of less use than even so poor a tool might be under a control more confident . . . You think of the period of time which will divide us, should you succeed in that which you have attempted, and return to your own people. But is not your presence here a proof that you are vexed by illusions only? When we consider time or space, we know that they are, and yet we know that they are both impossible . . . Were it otherwise, would it not be true that if two companions were to turn apart for a moment, though they were both immortal, and were to continue forward on their different ways, seeking each other for a million million of æons, they would be eternally separate, with a separation which would increase through all eternity? That is evident; but it is also incredible . . . Can you not learn to become fearless of circumstance, so that you may find the freedom of living,

and learn the joy of that liberty?"

So her mind struck, thought for thought, against the confusion of the thoughts I showed her.

Then she added, "I will do that which I can to secure the safety of the body which you value so greatly. I will ask my Leaders for their help when I rejoin them. If we should still be allied in the war which is coming, it will be a slight thing to require it. But does it matter so greatly? Is it not true that life is only good while we regard it lightly?"

At this she closed her mind, and rose, and left me. She gave no sign of regret, or of farewell, nor did she hasten nor loiter.

She left me with no further hope of her vitality to give me strength, or spirit to give me confidence, with a feeling of loneliness and despair such as I had not felt before, even in this strange and hostile world.

Chapter Fourteen

LOVE AND WAR

SO WE parted. Of the months that followed I do not write in detail for sufficient reason. I did not go straight down, as I had hoped to do. Time after time I was driven aside to avoid detection. Under the stress of war the spiral which had been comparatively little used, except at certain seasons, had become an artery of traffic. For many weeks I lived a furtive life of lurking peril. I fed at instant risk of detection, and slept without assurance of safety. On one Level, I went not only in fear of the Dwellers, but of other vermin, larger and better-armed than myself, that maintained a tol-

crated existence in a place that was given over to the incineration of garbage.

Once I spent a period which I cannot estimate, without food or water, in the interior of a machine of which I did not know the purpose, nor how or when it might become active to my destruction. There I lay, watching with sleepless vigilance for a moment when I might hope to escape unnoticed.

Concerning much I am silent, because it could be nothing more than a confused narrative of inexplicable things.

During the whole time I was conscious that the war continued, and that it was maintained at an increasing cost of life and effort.

In the end, when I had passed the Division (at which point the gravitation changes, being about four hundred and fifty miles below the surface), and, after many delays and deflections, had reached the place I sought in the Lower Levels, when I was at the very threshold of the domain of the Seekers of Wisdom, a moment's incautious boldness betrayed me, and I was seen and captured. I found myself held in pincers such as those in which I had seen the writhing body of Templeton, and was carried thus into the great laboratory, and laid aside as my captor was called to a more urgent occupation.

The pincers were not uncomfortable. Their jaws were of a rubber-like substance, ductile to the shape of the body they held—firmly as in a vice, and yet with an almost cushionlike softness.

I WAS laid so that I hung a few feet over the edge of a table, suspended sideways in the gripping jaws.

Expecting that death or mutilation were only delayed for a moment, I found myself roused to a vivid consciousness of the moving drama around me. I can see it still, in every detail, as, for several hours, I surveyed it.

War had invaded the laboratory, and it had become a theatre of operations, the most seriously injured bodies in which life still lingered being brought down this great distance for the facilities which it provided.

Those who had sought to postpone the desire of death by searching for curious knowledge in the bodies of other creatures were now working with a recovered energy to repair those of their younger fellows. Those who had boasted that their youth was of an invincible immortality were now being carried in, broken or maimed or in divided parts, to be repaired or rejected. And those who were past repair were not cast aside for fire or corruption to feed upon them, but the portions of their bodies which were still sound were used for the repair of their more lightly-injured companions, and for this

purpose (if not immediately required) they were hurried into a freezing-chamber, if possible before life had entirely left them.

I saw a surgeon stoop over a body which had been bitten through at the waist, so that it was almost entirely severed, and give a gesture of negation, on which it disappeared at once in the direction from which bodies, or parts of bodies were being brought and thawed as they were required for the repairing of others; muscles, or bones, or missing organs being grafted upon those who retained sufficient life to connect them.

On the distant surface of the world the fighting must have been of a desperate character, for while I was laid aside and forgotten a succession of wounded, most of them with ghastly injuries, were brought in, till it seemed that the ample floor of the laboratory would be too small to contain them.

One of the last was a woman.

I had only known her before in a moment's vision, but I could not forget or mistake that flame of life as I had seen it assert defiant youth against the deepest laws of the Universe which conceived it. And the flame of life was still there, and still unconquered, though the body was torn and opened, soiled with filth from the upper surface of the earth which had been the place of its conflict, and discolored in places to a sulphurous yellow from the action of its antagonist.

It was in tribute to that dominating vitality that the attendants paused in their work, the consciousness of my own peril left my mind, and the dying turned to regard her, as she gave her thought to the surgeon who was bending to observe her injuries.

"THE tide is turned" (and the thought was less a speech than a song of victory), "the tide is turned, and we have found the way that will triumph. Eight of them we have brought down in the place of fighting, on the Grey Beaches of the Amphibians—eight we have brought down, and the rest are scattered . . . Tell the women from me that everyone who is above the Youth of Motherhood is to go upward. It is the last order I give them. There are better things than the delights of the Five Approaches. Tell them that I have found death, and I do not fear it." Her eyes met those of the surgeon who was considering her injuries, and her thought was derisive. "Can you not see that I am spoiled beyond your mending? Am I one who would walk crutched, who have been the Center of Circles? You will pass me very quickly into the Place of Freezing. There are two women that follow whom you may repair from that which is uninjured, if you lose no time in the doing. You will not wait till I die . . .?" I was aware of a note of protest in the mind of the surgeon

that met her own, and was swept aside, weak as a bird's wind in the tempest. It was not his protest alone, but that of all, the injured and the attendants, who heard her. There was one thought that broke through like a cry of agony, and called my attention to a wounded form from which it came, which had been carried in behind her. With a surprise of recognition, I knew my captor of the first night—he who had called in sleep for that which he would never gain.

But their thoughts were beaten down by the indignation with which she perceived them. "Do you think to thwart my will because I am fallen?" It seemed that her thought swept the other protests aside to reach the form that was behind her. "*You* who would have come a thousand miles had I called you? Who would have waited to know my pleasure like a crouching dog. You have followed well where the stings were striking. Will you follow now where I lead you?"

"Yes," he said, "I will gladly follow."

There was no further protest. I heard the gates withdrawn, and the two litters, with their living burdens, passed into the Place of Freezing.

I saw that æons pass, but Love and War will continue.

Chapter Fifteen

RELEASE

I REMAINED for several hours gripped in that soft inflexible pressure, knowing not what of death or torture or mutilation I must undergo when they had leisure for my insignificance, and watching with an extraordinary mental clarity and aloofness the operations by which they built up the bodies of some of the less hopelessly injured with the limbs or organs of those who were themselves beyond saving.

But the time came when the pincers were lifted once again, and I was aware of the hatefully impartial eyes which considered my destiny. At this extremity of peril

I recalled the methods of the Amphibians. Desperately I fought for the self-control which I could not gain: desperately I fought to reach some contact with the mind on which my fate depended. But I failed utterly. It was natural for the creatures he examined to protest and struggle, and the fact did not interest his mind. My thoughts were nothing to him, and he did not heed them.

BUT I was more fortunate than Templeton. Instead of being immersed in the jars, I was plunged immediately into the white light which had condemned him. The sensation was not unpleasant —might, indeed, be described as ecstatic for a mind untroubled. My body tingled with life. Looking down, I was conscious of a new nakedness. I could see everything which my body held, and yet through them. The activities in every vein were transparent.

I was held there for some time, and then lifted out, examined, and plunged back for a further period. When I expected to be thrown aside, I was carried, still held in that vice-like grip, to a further room, where I was thrust into one of a great number of little cages which lined its walls.

I considered my position, and was not sure that I might not come to envy even the fate of Templeton. The operation I had undergone had already disfigured me. There was no hair, long or short, left upon me. Even my hands showed an unaccustomed bareness. I looked round, and I cannot say what I saw. It is best forgotten.

I will only say that Harry Brett was in an opposite cage, and though I called to him, he did not know me. He was quite mad, and it was true that he was quite happy. Like a child, he enjoyed to watch the color of his flesh change . . . but I have resolved that I will not tell it.

. . . A Dweller passed before my cage, thinking slowly and clearly. He inquired for a Primitive of the False-skin Age who was claimed by the Amphibians. With a stir of hope I responded.

After a moment's questioning, he allowed my identity. He told me, "You are released at the request of the Leaders of the Amphibians. There has been fighting on the Grey Beaches, at which they helped us to conquer. They might have had what they would, but they asked for this thing only." He looked at me with more curiosity than contempt, and I knew that he would have cut me open without scruple had he felt free to do so, to discover the secret of my importance. He went on, "You are to be given to the Seekers of Wisdom. You will be safe with them so long as you tell them some new thing continually . . . It needn't be true—that doesn't matter," he added more to himself than to me.

HE LIFTED me from the cage, and walked on at a quiet pace, and I trotted behind him.

I was with the Seekers of Wisdom many months, till the year was completed.

During that time I was examined incessantly on every detail of the civilization from which I came. I defended it as best I might, and I explained it where I was able. But I found that I knew few things thoroughly, and my explanations halted continually. I met a readier understanding of social life from creatures which were more after my own kind than had been possible to the Amphibian mind, but I was still vexed by the contempt with which my race was regarded. I reflected that the antipathy which we feel for anything which is different from our own customs might be theirs also, and that they might be less than fair to us in consequence. Brief as our own lives are, we know that many of us live too long to remain in harmony with the changes which a generation brings. I could not see that their own methods of life were as far advanced as they thought them.

Yet the reactions of their minds will not leave me as they learnt of the filth of our polluted rivers, and the pall of our blinded skies.

I must still see, as they saw them, the pity of our neglected land, the folly that leaves our fields half barren while the shadow of starvation is but ten years distant, the foulness of our congested cities, the insane worship of movement which leaves its thousands slain or maimed unpitied in our bloody streets . . .

But to write of these things in detail would be to begin a book when it is time for the ending.

I lost the count of days, and the time came unlooked-for when the year was over . . .

Chapter Sixteen

RETURN

"DANBY," I said, "you might fetch me an overcoat."

Having been provided with this useful garment, I sat once more at the familiar fireside.

I looked at the clock, which had indicated three minutes after eight when I had shaken hands with the Professor, with a disliked solemnity, before I commenced the experiment of travel into the unbelievably distant future.

The hand was now at seven minutes after the hour.

I had noticed a lump of half-burnt coal that had poised perilously over the top bar of the grate as I had risen to leave them. It

broke now, as I gazed, and fell noisily into the ashpan.

Yes—it was the same fire—the same night. It would be no use to tell them.

And yet I saw that they were impatient for me to begin, but how could I? How could I expect them to believe?

And so much was beyond the reach of words to tell it.

"Did you find them?" said the Professor, with a note of suppressed anxiety in his voice which would have been less surprising from one of the others, and which reminded me that the question was not merely of my own adventures. I realized the different values of that room from those of the world that I had left behind (or ages and ages before) me.

"I'm afraid you won't see them again," I answered. "Templeton is dead. Brett is insane, and can't live much longer. They are torturing him horribly. At least, I don't know whether that is a fair word. He enjoys being tortured."

Then I told them, in a confused way, with many interruptions and discursions. Frequently I saw the doubt in the eyes of one or other, and then they looked at me, and something in my appearance caused the doubt to die.

I ROSE, and looked in the pier-glass.

"Professor," I said, with a moment's bitterness, "I shouldn't have asked for an overcoat only. I need a skull-cap."

But it was not only that I was so utterly hairless. My face was different—younger, and more virile, and there was a subtle change in the eyes, which I could not define. It was the face of a stranger.

I became conscious also of a bodily alertness and vigor, very different from the physical conditions of the earlier evening.

"It may grow," he answered mildly.

I don't think he was hopeful. I know I wasn't.

"I think you've made me a freak for this world. Perhaps I'd better go back," I said, thoughtlessly.

"Would you go forward again?" The Professor's voice was eager.

"I don't know——" I began, doubtfully.

"Isn't he the principal witness for the defense?" Bryant interpolated. "You need his help against the charge of doing away with Brett and Templeton."

"I think," said the Professor, "he might better be described as the sole witness for the prosecution. But I don't think that we have any legal responsibility. They took the risk freely. Besides, they're not dead yet— Of course, we're all sorry, but exploration is always hazardous. Really," he said seriously, "we have postponed their deaths for a rather long period."

Certainly, the legal position was somewhat complicated, but I felt

that there must be a flaw in the argument somewhere. I couldn't help the retort, "Just as you've prolonged the life of my hair for the same period."

The Professor was not often disconcerted, but this silenced him for a moment. Then he said, "But you have come back, and they have not. Surely, even you can see the difference."

"I would rather see my hair where it used to be."

"Hair," said the Professor, "has become a useless parasitic growth, which we are in process of discarding. You are only ahead of your time."

"A bald head," I replied, and felt the joke was out of place as I spoke it. The Professor ignored me, and Bryant reverted to the earlier discussion. "I don't see how we can have any legal trouble, though it may be awkard to explain the disappearances of two guests in succession. Mrs. Brett will have something to say. But isn't there a law that you can't accuse anyone of murder unless you can exhibit a body?"

"I believe that is so," said the Professor, with relief in his voice. "I suppose that is why they always dig up the garden."

THIS roused young Danby. "They won't dig up this one—Not till the bulbs are over."

"Oh, but they will," I retorted. I felt that they deserved that much. Why hadn't they gone themselves, instead of passing on the risk to others? "The police are most painstaking in these matters, especially when one of their own number is concerned. You mustn't forget that Templeton was a retired inspector. Why not divert their minds to the cellar?—a few bricks out of place, and a little soil, and just a trace of quicklime. They'd never miss that . . . They'll dig for a week."

I saw that the Professor thought my levity was ill-timed. There was nothing new in that. But Bryant gave a fresh turn to the discussion. "You say that Brett isn't dead? Suppose he comes back while the investigation's proceeding?"

We looked at one another in consternation. In the condition in which I had seen him last he would be an awkward fact to explain to the official mind. I imagined the sarcasm of the prosecuting counsel as I told my tale in the witness-box. Doubtless, the dock would follow.

The Professor was the only one who was at all unmoved by the hopeful suggestion.

"He cannot return now. Were he doing so, he would have been back before tonight."

"I have no doubt he is dead." I added, "I think they had nearly finished him when I saw him."

"Yes," said the Professor, "he will die during the year." He was the only one of us who was not

confused in his tenses. He thought a moment, and then turned to me seriously. "I regret the capillary singularity of which you complain, but you will admit that you did not go without warning. I am about to ask you a further favor. I want you to write a careful narrative of your experiences, making it as accurate as is possible to your journalistic mind. For this narrative, if it be written promptly and clearly, I will give you £2000. I shall publish it —as fiction, if necessary—and may recover the money.

"Afterwards, I hope that, in the interests of science, rather than for any prospective pecuniary advantage, you will consent to explore this strange world somewhat further. You have shown considerable adroitness in avoiding its dangers, and you will have a great advantage over a less experienced adventurer."

He looked for my reply with a very real anxiety, and I answered slowly.

"I will write the book willingly, but as to going again—well, I wouldn't do it alone. Perhaps, if your daughter Clara would come with me . . ."

"Clara!" exclaimed the Professor.

"Yes," I said, "she might . . . I know her better than you do . . . I'll think it over."

And so, here is the book. It isn't all I saw or heard, and it leaves much unexplained. How can a year of such experiences be clearly told, or crowded into a single volume? But I have tried to be accurate.

As to adventuring once again—well, it depends on Clara. I'll ask her now.

... The End ...

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